

SIXTH EDITION.

Mining Camp Life



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OR,

The Pets of Paddy's Flat.

A Story of Mining Camp Life.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "LITTLE
TORNADO," "LITTLE AH-SIN," "TIGER
DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TOM, DICK, AND HARRY.

TOM MURPHY was an ornament to "The Green," and bore its seal on the tip of his tongue.

Dick Johnson was a nature's nobleman in ebony, warranted fast colors, and bound to

THE THREE JOLLY PARDS.

"shine" in any community that he deigned to grace.

Harry Keene was a graduate, with first honors, from "Curb-stone College, Gotham."

Mere chips on the stream of life, all three had been stranded at Paddy's Flat while yet in their teens, without, as far as they knew, ancestors or ancestral estates.

However, as they all agreed, there was no use in crying over the situation. They had at least the pick of pluck and the shovel of shrewdness, and they were bound to have a good time while using them.

To this end they formed a league, offensive and defensive, against the whole world, styling themselves:

"The Three Jolly Pards of Paddy's Flat."

"As there are just three of us," said Harry, "we can have equal votes in running the league, and no bossing. In any disagreement as to what shall be done, there must be two on one side against one on the other, and the majority shall settle it, no matter who has to give in."

"Whoo!" shouted Tom. "What's that, sure, but just the arrangement that Byles's mother-in-law got up? An' it's Satan's own—the old schemer!"

"What's that?" cried Harry, indignant at having his pet plan rejected in this off-hand style.

"Just this: 'Bobby Byles,' says the owld woman, 'wheniver thayre's a difference of opinion betwene you an' Betty,' says she, 'faith, it's meself that'll be fur casting the deciding vote. Thin we'll have p'ace an' hairmony in the family,' says she."

"Well, didn't that work all right?"

"Ilignant—but fur wan thing."

"What was that?"

"Thayre niver was a time but the three o' them pulled 'ach a separate road."

"Well, if it comes to that, we'll toss up for it."

"Faith! that's what the shark says to the sea-sick traveler, whin he saw him making wry faces over his dinner."

"G'way, boy!" interposed Dick. "You's gittin' too funny fur to lib in dis hyeah climate!"

With such a bandying of words was "the league" formed.

And now for its first "round" with the world.

"I say, fellers," cried Harry, shortly after its formation, "the league is getting on too slowly. What we want is money—more money!"

"Pears like dey's lots mo' in de same fix," observed Dick. "Maybe, now, you's got a notion how we's gwine to make de raise. Dat's de 'sent-tal t'ing."

"If I hadn't what would I be shooting off my mouth for? You can play the tambourine, Dick."

"I jist kin do dat!" cried Dick, with a sudden flash of his eyes and a gleam of his ivories. "It runs in de fam'ly. Beat any daky in de States at dat."

"Then you can dance a breakdown and sing a song, of course?"

"He's better at 'ating!" observed Tom.

"Maybe you kin do de singin' you' own se'f," suggested Dick. "You's a canary bird, you is!"

"And you, Tom," interposed Harry, "you can rattle the bones—"

"Like a hearse widout springs!" was Tom's grave assurance.

"And dance a jig, and crack a joke, and sing a ballad in brogue, like a true son of Erin."

"An' you, Harry," broke in Dick, eagerly, "kin whack de banjo, an' dance de socks off'n bofe ob us put togedder, an'—"

"That'll do, Dick. We won't say anything about my singing qualities. Finally, we can all do more or less at ground and lofty tumbling."

"Den why shouldn't we turn dese hyeah 'complishments to some 'count?"

"Be jabers! we'll hire a hall an' give a show!"

"That's just my idea. What's the reason we can't raise a breeze in this dull camp? We'll get Dinny McGee's dance hall for an hour every night—"

"An' strike de boys fur to paternize home institutions!"

"We'll coin money, so we will!"

So it was arranged; and for the next month the Pards of Paddy's Flat stole away every night to an old abandoned shaft, and there, by the light of greasewood torches, perfected themselves in the art of minstrelsy and general variety business.

Then came the negotiation for the hall; and this had been prepared as carefully as any part of their performance.

"We're just at the turning-point between being boys and men," said Harry, feeling the mustache that was beginning to make fairly respectable appearance on his lip.

"B'ys!" interrupted Tom, disdainfully. "If we're b'ys, I'd like to see whayre ye git yer min! Don't we do min's work, and wear min's clo's, I dunno?"

"An' eat men's dinners!" added Dick. "Hyuh! hyuh!"

"That's all right," replied Harry. "But you'll find that we're on the kid list yet awhile with the boys. And we'll have to work this thing on strictly business principles; or they'll take it as a lark, and give us the guy from the word go."

And so it proved. For Dinny McGee laughed and called them "little divils," though they stood as many inches in their shoes as he did.

"But bein's as it's a home production," he concluded, "I 'low to give yez a show. Yees kin have the hall; an' we'll see what's made out of it."

But Harry, who acted as spokesman, insisted upon a straight-forward business contract—so much for so much.

"We propose to rent the hall," he said, "and take our own risks. We'll take it for a week sure, and pay you the money down, make or break. But we're to have the privilege of continuing our lease for a month at the same figures, if we choose to go on."

They got it on their own terms, with very little dickering; for Dinny was not particularly imaginative, being one of those men who never "catch on" to a new idea.

"Maybe it'll bring a few extra dhrinks to me till, fur a night or two, anyways," he said.

The Pards kept their own counsel, and posted their advertisements.

It consisted of a piece of muslin, three yards by two, the inscription on which was the work of the Express agent, as a favor to Harry.

It read:

"FIRST GRAND ENTERTAINMENT

OF THE

WORLD-RENOWNED

NEW YORK, NEW ORLEANS AND SAN FRANCISCO

AGGREGATION OF

M NSTRELSY AND HIGH DRAMATIC ART."

With this "starter," it launched forth in the most "highfalutin'" strain, detailing the marvels to be seen "all upon the inside," for the small stipend of "four bits" a head.

The sounding title, embracing the whole Continent, was Dick's idea, suggested by the fact that Harry was from New York, while Dick was from New Orleans, and Tom from San Francisco.

In the programme one title was not put in small letters nor in an inconspicuous place—"The Three Jolly Pards of Paddy's Flat."

The boys "caught on," and sent the thing "booming, with a rush." It was a home institution, as Dick had said; and they were proud of it.

Only one voice was raised in discouragement. Grumpy Cale Burchard had growled, with his surly frown:

"You'd better not toot yer horn too loud on this hyar thing till ye find out what it's goin' to be like."

"Like!" cried hearty Jim Gladden. "Don't we know what the kids is like? What more guarantee d'ye want than that, I'd like to know?"

So the thing was boomed, until on the night of the performance Paddy's Flat fairly swarmed with visitors from neighboring camps.

Dinny McGee stared as he saw his place besieged; but Harry pocketed the "spons" at the door with the coolness of an old showman.

Dick's eyes glistened like china alleys.

"Hi, golly!" he cried to Tom, "dis hyeah's jist business, dis is!"

"Kape yer shirt on!" muttered Tom, striving to preserve an outward calm, though the heart within him was beating a reveille that was almost deafening.

"B-t what'll we do wid all de skads what we rakes in? We's struck a bonanza, dat's one sure t'ing!"

At last the whole camp seemed packed in that one room; and then Harry came back and joined his pards at their stage toilets.

"Is you carryin' a bank aroun' in yo' pocket?" asked Dick, with a chuckle.

"You bet I ain't!" replied Harry. "No such risks for Joseph! That money is deposited with Bill Westlake—the Express agent; 'and I've got a receipt for it."

"Faith, that's business! What's the pile?"

"What do you think?"

"I say 'bout a thousand dollars."

"Whoo! Listen till the like of him!" cried

Tom, who had shrewdly watched the expression of Harry's face. "PU be satisfied wid five hundred, an' good luck to the three of us."

Harry laughed.

"Have you any idea how much of an audience it would take to make up five hundred dollars, at four bits a head?"

Neither Tom nor Dick had thought of it in this definite way.

Tom scratched his head in bewilderment, while Dick canted his head forward and sideways, and batted his eyes very rapidly in the effort to solve the problem mentally.

"There are two hundred and eleven out there," said Harry. "That gives us a hundred and five dollars and fifty cents—and out of it we must pay Dinny."

"A dirthy hundred dollars!" fairly howled Tom, though careful not to raise his voice loud enough to be heard in the outer room, where the audience were waiting, beguiling the time meanwhile by "gauging the flow in their irritating sluices."

Dick could only stare with his mouth wide open.

"A dirty hundred dollars!" repeated Harry. "And pray, how often do you make a dirty hundred dollars in one night?"

"But, by de way dey come in, I t'ought we's done gwine to make 'nough to 'vest in de Sarpentine Flume Company."

"Serpentine nothin'! Are you ready? They'll tear down the house if we keep 'em waitin' much longer."

As he spoke a thunderous roar came from the dance-hall, the pounding of two hundred and eleven stogie boots. To this uproar was added sundry shrill whistles and cat-calls.

Many a time had both Tom and Dick assisted in such a summons, but neither had ever before been the subject of it; and now it burst upon them like a thunder-clap out of a clear sky.

Tom turned as white as a ghost.

Dick became a dull lead-color, and his lips turned as blue as a whet-stone, while his eyes rolled, and his teeth came within an ace of chattering.

Harry laughed at them, though, truth to tell, he was not a little startled himself. But he realized that everything now depended upon him, and it steadied him.

"You're pretty fellers!" he cried. "I'll bet you never thought of this."

"What'll we do?" gasped Tom, as if his one thought was the possibility of instant flight.

"What shall we do?" panted Dick. "Fo' de lo'd! dis hyeah's awful!"

"Do?" repeated Harry. "We'd lose our money and be guded out of camp, if I was such a fool as you two are. Now, I knew it would be this way, and I fixed the programme so that you fellows could get on your pins before you had anything to do by yourselves. Mark what I say! Don't forget to make your bow before you sit down; and after you are down, the minute you hear me strike up, go it blind! You can't miss it. We've practiced the thing so that it'll 'whis'le itself,' if you only cut loose."

"Are you ready?"

"Wait jist one bressed minute!" panted Dick, pretending to fix something about his dress, though really it was only to gain one more breath before facing those gorgons.

"Now we're in line. Wait for the next spell of quiet, and then we'll walk on."

"Now then! And Tom, if you balk, I'll mash you under the ear before them all! You know I stick to my word, whether school keeps or not!"

Tom was directly in front of Harry, and had to walk to the further end of the stage. Harry was to sit in the middle, and Dick was the other "end-man."

"Remember!—your bows first!" was Harry's last caution.

Then, when the audience had stamped itself into ordinary quiet, they marched onto the stage.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHOW.

TOM was got up in very good style, all things considered—in knee-breeches and woolen stockings, having a fair representation of a caubeen on his head, with a "dear little dhudeen" tucked through the band, and a "sprig o' shillaly" under his arm.

Harry had put his "pile" into having a ready-made frock coat of black altered into a "swallow-tail;" and this, with a "b'iled" shirt, made him look the handsome fellow he was.

Dick was dressed as a jockey, with a sky-blue cap; a shirt, with an immense turn-over collar.

of striped red and white goods; and a buff jacket.

As thus they bowed before their audience, the boys went wild.

"Give 'em a Paddy's Flat send-off!" shouted Hearty Jim Gladden, leaping upon a stool and swinging his hat above his head.

The crowd responded with a storm of yells; and, seen across the foot-lights, the excited faces and surging bodies presented a spectacle anything but soothing to the victims of their enthusiasm.

Stunned by the uproar, Tom took a step forward, as if fascinated. Then he bethought himself, and hurriedly sat down.

But, alas! that step had carried him out of his reckoning. He took his seat on the edge of the chair; the chair tipped over; and he fetched up on the floor!

For an instant he was so dazed that he sat still as he had dropped, the picture of dismay.

Then Harry's quick wit came to the rescue. Before that audience all was lost, if it was once suspected that this was an accident. The boys would guy them "from the jump."

"Pick yourself up, Mr. Murphy," said Harry, in his professional tone. "We don't sit on the floor in this country."

Now Dick has got into his seat without accident; and in his delight at seeing that the discomfort had fallen to the lot of his pard, and not to himself, he impulsively threw back his head, stretched his mouth to its greatest extent, and burst into a loud:—

"Hyuh! hyuh!"

But at that point he remembered where he was; and his mirth was cut short as if he were shot, while he jumped and drew himself together in real terror.

Meanwhile Tom had got upon his feet. Dick's laugh enraged him. When a "spunky" boy gets mad, no stage fright has any show. So Tom glared across at Dick, drawing back his fist and wagging his head from side to side menacingly.

"The boys" mistook this for acting; and it "brought down the house."

Harry saw that he was in luck, and had the good sense to immediately strike into the overture.

If his companions did not start off exactly right, the defect would be drowned in the applause; and by the time the audience got settled down so that they could hear, everything would be going along swimmingly.

The first note of the banjo was to Tom and Dick like a lift on the striking-rod of a clock. It set them going; and as they warmed to the work they regained self-possession. Then the spirit of mischief began to leap in their veins; and before the overture was through Tom was clicking the bones in the most approved style, while Dick was thumping his tambourine with his knuckles and knees, toes, head and elbows, as artistically as any veteran in burnt cork.

This was well received, and was followed by the usual jokes between the middle-man and end-men, by Irish songs, and Negro melodies, and sentimental ballads, and by jigs and break-downs that stirred the spectators to the wildest enthusiasm.

Finally Harry said:

"By the way, Mr. Johnson, I have heard it hinted that there were some romantic passages in your life, if you could only be persuaded to tell them."

"Well, sah, dat's so," admitted Dick, resting his tambourine on his knee scratching his head reflectively. "Dah was one passage in 'tic'lar dat was romantic—berry romantic, sah."

"Ah! We will take it as a great favor, if you will relate it to us."

"Well, sah, I took dat passage es a great favah, too; but befo' I got frough wid it I made up my mine dat it wa'n't so favorable as I took it to be."

"Indeed! It turned out unfortunately, then?"

"Berry unfortunate, sah! berry unfortunate!" said Dick, shaking his head gloomily.

"You found the fair one cruel?"

"De which, sah?" asked Dick, looking up in surprise.

"The lady was unkind."

"What lady, sah?"

"Why, the lady you have just referred to."

"I hain't 'ferred to no lady, sah."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"De passage. Ain't dat what you axed me 'bout?"

"Exactly! A romantic passage in your life."

"Dat's it, sah. A passage what I took in a cattle-car, f'om Frisco to—"

"Oh! I don't mean that at all!"

"Dat's what you said, sah. Leabe it to Mistah Murphy!"

"But I meant—were you ever in love?"

"Lub?"

"Yes, sir—in love."

"Wid de gals? Hyuh! hyuh!"

"Now, sir, I see that I have got you on the right track. But, instead of making the thing general, we should prefer that you would narrate your experience with some particular girl."

"'Tic'lar!" cried Dick. "Dat gal 'tic'lar? Well, she was 'tic'lar in some t'ings. But de ole man! Well, now, go 'way!—he was 'tic'lar!"

"Go on, Mr. Johnson! go on!" said Harry, encouragingly, rubbing his hands and smiling, as if in expectation of something good. "You are among friends, and everything you say will be considered in strict confidence. Tell us all about it."

"Oh! can't tell ye 'bout dat, Mistah Keene! 'Deed an' 'deed I can't!"

"Oh, yes, you can! Come! come!"

"Ugh! ugh! I's bashful!"

"Aw, well," growled Tom, "av yez can't tell it, ye'd better sing it, or give some better man the flure!"

"Well, I might do dat, sah."

"Eh! sing it!" cried Harry, eagerly.

"Yes, sah."

"Good enough!"

And to Harry's accompaniment on the banjo, Dick sung:—

OBER DE KITCHEN FENCE.

"My lub stood onto a hickory log,

Ober de kitchen fence.

She whispered:—'Now, Clem, bewah o' de dog!'

Ober de kitchen fence.

An' undah de wash-bench, hearty an' hale,

Dat bull-dog wagged his stump ob a tail,

An' many a time he has made me sail

Ober de kitchen fence!

Ober de kitchen fence,—

Hi, golly! dat skeer was intense!

Dah nebbber growed up sich an or'nery pup;

But, you bet! ef he 'lowed on d's chile to sup,

'Twas a slip dat time 'twixt de lip an' de cup.

Ober de kitchen fence!

De ole man tackled me dah, one night,

Ober de kitchen fence.

A-courtin' his gal wid all my might,

Ober de kitchen fence.

In a jiffy he up wid his white-wash brush,

Lambasted po' Clem tell he's soft as mush,

An' fired him out wid a Spanish rush—

Ober de kitchen fence!

Ober de kitchen fence!

Ef ye don't want to lib in suspense,

Ye'd better hang 'roun' when de ole man's nigh!

He'll gib ye suffin' to make ye spy!

De fu'st t'ing ye know, ye'll go out on a fly—

Ober de kitchen fence!

But de pot ob true lub b'iles an' b'iles,

Ober de kitchen fence;

An' gals has lots o' cunnin' wiles—

Ober de kitchen fence.

When her faddah's out a-buyin' ole clo's,

In de cellah, you bet! dat bull-dog goes!

An' den— But dat ah's 'undah de rose!

Ober de kitchen fence!

Ober de kitchen fence.

Hyuh! hyuh! I swah! It's immense!

We set on de wash-bench, happy as clams;

Wid his white-wash brush no ole man slams;

No bull-dog snaps at dis lovyer's hams!

Ober de kitchen fence."

To the boys this was "the cream of the evening;" and whatever may be said of the song, Dick's rendering of it was certainly worthy of all their applause.

In their enthusiasm they flung a shower of coins upon the stage, and "called him out" again and again, until surly Cale Burchard shouted:

"Oh, give us a rest on that thing! Cut it short!"

Jim Gladden and several others turned upon Burchard wrathfully, since it was for their pleasure that Dick had repeated his performance, and only a churlish fellow would have found any fault with it.

But the Three Jolly Pards had the pluck to fight their own battles. And not the least of this spirit was in Tom Murphy. So, to cut in ahead of the good intentions of their friends, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Musther Keen, sor!"

"Well, Mr. Murphy, what can I do for you?"

"Can you tell me, sor, whoy it is that Dinny McGee's customers are always so noisy?"

At this promise of a local "gag" the audience immediately pricked up their ears, and Cale Burchard and his spleen were forgotten.

"My dear Mr. Murphy," said Harry, with

an air of deprecation, "allow me to remind you that you are getting a little personal. You forget that you are speaking of our genial host—"

"Janial ur not janial, that's nayther here nor thayre," persisted Tom, doggedly. "Don't you go to blarneying him, sor. He'll take nothing off the rint o' the hall becaze o' that."

"Very well, sir, you shall answer your own question. If what you say is true, then why are Mr. McGee's customers always so noisy?"

"Becaze, sor, the stuff that he gives them to dbrink niver was stilled."

This unexpected reply was received with a yell of delight, followed by roars of hoarse laughter and the thunder of heavy boots.

Such a joke at the expense of their fellow-townsmen was good enough; but the audacity of the thing, coming from a lot of "youngsters" in McGee's own house, added to the pungency of the wit.

As the applause burst forth, Tom, who had looked at Harry while replying, whirled upon his audience with an affected stare of angry surprise; and the moment he could make himself heard, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Kape still!"

This "fetched 'em ag'in."

When the uproar subsided, Dinny McGee claimed the attention of the crowd.

"Gintlemen!" he cried, "av I wouldn't take annything off the rint fur the blarney, sure it's meself that would do that same fur the chake o' that young spalpeen! They'll pay me no rint this night, annyways."

The crowd cheered this generosity, knowing however that the increased profits at the bar were enough to make Dinny bless his luck that the Pards had chosen his place for their entertainment.

Then came "hits" at all the prominent men in the camp, with one exception. Not a word was said in any way referring to Cale Burchard.

This neglect piqued his vanity mightily; for he considered himself "the biggest toad in the puddle;" and it was a fact that nothing of public importance was done without him having his "say."

As before he vented his spleen on Dick.

While the rest were laughing at one of Dick's jokes, he growled spitefully:

"That leetle nig thinks he's deuced smart, don't he?"

"Oh, dry up, Cale!" cried Jim Gladden. "What's sourin' on your stomach? The kids hain't done nothin' to you; an' they ain't a-goin' to."

But, with the thrill of resentment that Cale's fling roused in his breast, Dick had a sudden inspiration; and turning to Jim, he said, pointedly:

"Don't count yo' chick'ns on de roost, sah!"

The boys "caught on" instantly; and many who would have echoed Jim's reproof to the churl waited to hear what Dick had to say in his own defense.

"Mistah Keene," he said, "did it ebber 'cur to you, sah, dat de Lo'd was mo' 'fended wid Paddy's Flat dan he was wid Egypt in de olden time?"

Harry started. This had not been prepared in their rehearsals.

But there was no getting out of it; and so, quaking for fear that Dick would get off something flat, he replied:

"No, Mr. Johnson; I can't say that I ever thought of it in that connection."

"Well, sah, de Lo'd sent sebben plagues on de lan' ob Egypt; an' one o' dem plagues was a swarm o' locuses. Ye see, he 'tribute it all roun', so's ebberybody git a dab, but nobody git it all in a heap. But, sah, when he 'cluded to plague Paddy's Flat, 'stid o' sendin' a swarm o' locuses, he b'iled all his wraf down into one low cuss!"

And in making this point, Dick stared so hard at Cale Burchard that the dullest could not fail to see its application.

A rough crowd is not particular about the wit of an insulting joke. The boys yelled with laughter.

Jim Gladden clapped Cale a sounding thwack on the back, and cried:

"Ha! ha! ha! Blow me ef de kid hain't seen ye, an' gone one better! Don't you lay fur him no more. When you think he's asleep, he's only playin' 'possum."

But already the ruffian had leaped to his feet, purple with rage. And with a flood of profanity, he "made a break" for the stage, determined to "mop the floor" with the urchin who had the audacity to make him a laughing-stock.

But he found himself opposed by a living wall made up of men who would "douse his glim"

before they would let him touch his clever antagonist.

Fume as he might, it was "no go!"

Then, to make it more tantalizing, the Pards rose and marched off the stage, singing:

"I's gwine to come by-me-by!
I's gwine to come by-me-by!
I's gwine to come
To my heavenly home,
Oh, I's gwine to come by-me-by!"

They had got "squar'"; but in doing it, they had "waked up" the ugliest customer in the camp.

He glared after them with purple face and bloodshot eyes, and shook his fist, with the menace:

"Blast ye! ye hain't hycared the last o' me!"

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS BEAUTY.

THE show had been a great success. It had run a week, with a change of programme every night, since the minstrels had to appear always before the same audience.

"And now," said Harry, ruefully, "what's to be done! We're completely sung out, and talked out, and danced out, and tumbled out; and it begins to look to me as if we were about played out!"

"We ain't broke; dat's one comfort!" chuckled Dick.

"But five hundred dollars won't last us forever. The boys caught on because it was a new thing, and because we were kids. But if we expect to hold our audience, we'll have to give them the worth of their money. Business is business, and no favors asked."

"Hi dah!" shouted Dick, suddenly leaping into the air and cracking his heels together. "I's got an idea!"

"Haag on to it!" cried Tom, with an expression of eager anxiety, as if it were an animal of some sort that Dick had caught, which was likely to escape him.

"Don't you worry," said Dick. "Dat 'ah's nailed fur to stay."

"Sure, that's what the undhertaker says whin his mother-in-law yells out in her coffin. But the owld lady came out all the same, an' walloped him wid the mop-handle manny a time thereafter."

"What is your idea?" asked Harry.

"We-uns has got to trabbel!"

"Whisht, man dear!" cried Tom, catching at the idea at once. "I'll tell yez how we'll manage it. We'll rag out as foine as anny thraveling company; an' whin we sthrike a camp, we'll put on all our togs an' give them a street parade! Whin they see thayre's money in it, they'll b'lave it's worth anny man's gilders. Duds, me b'y! duds is the recommendation ye're wantin'."

With the Three Jolly Pards, to see a point was "to go for it, thar an' then." So they at once set out for the store of a worthy Jew, who was one of the institutions of Paddy's Flat.

Now Abraham, when he was not perjuring himself misrepresenting Peter Funk goods as his latest "imbordations from Baris," always stood in his doorway, waiting to "take in" any unlucky pilgrim that passed that way.

At sight of the pards, he at once began to rub his hands and smile; and even advancing up the street to meet them, he grasped their hands with as much warmth as if they had been bosom friends just returned from a voyage round the world.

"Ah, my yo'ng frients!" he cried, fairly dragging them into his den. "Shust in time! Hst!—sav not'ing! I haf a prize!"

With an air of great mystery he ran behind the counter, and set up a great scuffling among the boxes down there out of sight, well calculated to excite curiosity.

Presently he rose, and bustling about like a fussy old hen, made a great parade of clearing a space on the counter, even flicking the dust from the spot with an old silk handkerchief, and spreading some brown wrapping paper smoothly over it.

Once more diving under the counter, he produced three "plug" hats, which he ranged in a row before his astonished customers, and then stood off at a little distance, to gaze admiringly at the display and expectantly at the Pards.

For a moment they stared; then they looked at one another; finally they burst into a roar of laughter, Dick almost tying himself in a bow-knot, as he stamped his feet and slapped his legs.

"An' what's that?" roared Tom.

"Is it alive?" screamed Dick, holding his sides.

Abraham threw up his hands, and shrugged

his shoulders to his ears, elevated his brows, and puckered his mouth into a round O, the picture of horrified amazement at the reception of his effort to please.

"Why, uncle!" laughed Harry, "you don't expect us to wear those things, do you?"

"Vy note?"

"The boys would guy us out of camp."

Abraham stood aghast.

"My yo'ng frients, haf you peen in Baris dis year?" he cried.

"Dis yeah?" repeated Dick, scratching his head reflectively. "Lem me see! No, reckon 'twa'n't dis yeah. Las' yeah, now! How'd dat do ye? Or yeah befo'; or forty-'lebben yeahs befo' dat?"

"Ah, you should go to Baris! My brudder, he write me last veek, ven he sent me dot last inforce of goots. It is de latest fashion. De yo'ng shentlemens in Baris vill wear not'inks but silk hats."

"Nothing but hats?" shouted Tom, in pretended horror—"in the street? Millia murder! An' do the pape thayre go naked?"

"Shust you try dot on, my goot frient!" urged Abraham, with an indulgent smile.

Dick set one on over his left eye, and twisting his body into a grotesque shape, went strutting about the store, singing:

"I's a dude, a dandy dude!"

That gave Harry an idea.

"Why, look here!" he cried. "This is just what we want."

"Shust vat you vant? Vell, I shoul't smile!" cried Abraham, taking off Harry's hat and setting one of the "tiles" artistically in its place.

"But we only want one—for the stage, you know."

"Vone! vone!" cried Abraham, as if a sacrilege had been proposed. "Say dhree! Dot vas all right dot you haf 'em for de stache; but you vill haf 'em for de street more as for de stache."

"Vat you t'ink my broder he write to me ven I send for dot last imbordation?"

"Abraham," he write, 'you don't know dot markets. Of you vas in de Bowery, den dot vas all right. But in dot vild Western goundry, you no got dose customers vat know dose Baris hat. It is petter you got dose New York hat, more sheaper as dose Baris hat.'

"Py shimony! vat you t'ink I write pack to my brudder?"

"Don't you pick you'selluf up pefore you fall down! Dere is no goundry like dis goundry! Ve haf yo'ng shentlemens here vas haf peen on de Bowery, unt don't you forget it! Sent me de finest hat dot you find in Baris; unt if dey haf in Prussels dose hats petter as in Baris, sent me dose hat fon Prussels, py shiminetta!"

But while Abraham was telling of his indignant vindication of the country, Tom had been struggling with one of the hats, until he had succeeded in getting it down over his ears.

"Great sufferin' Moses!" he now cried out, "what will I be doin' wid the like o' this?"

"Ah, my frient! your head is a leetle too shmall for dot hat," observed Abraham, hastily taking it from him.

"What's that?" shouted Tom, wrathfully. "My head too small? Bad scan til the likes o' yez! will I put a bigger head on you, I dunno? My head is all right, sor! It's an iligant size! It's yer owld chimney-top that's too big, so it is!"

"Oh, yes! yes! yes!" breathlessly admitted Abraham. "Bote ve make dot all right!"

He grabbed the hat off of Harry's head, and substituted the one he had taken from Tom; but, finding that it did not fit so well as the one Harry already had, he replaced the latter; and hurriedly tearing and folding a strip of brown paper, he inserted it under the sweat-leather of the larger hat, and again put it on Tom's head.

"An' what's that, I dunno?" cried Tom, instantly pulling the hat off, taking the strip of paper out, and examining it as if it might be the device of some dynamite fiend. "Do yez think I'll be afther fur carrying the half of a grocery shthore or a mate-shop in the band o' me hat? 'Pon me sow! I'll not have the loike o' that in me hat!"

And he threw it away contemptuously.

Before poor Abraham could expostulate with him, Dick claimed his attention.

"Look a-yeah, boss! Dis won't do. Do you take me fur one o' dem Australian chillen what trabbles wid a show, wid heads no bigger'n a pickaninny's? I's got a large brain, sah. Got to hab metropolitan 'commodations to take it all in. See dat bump ob obfustification? Great head, sah!"

Desperately Abraham clapped Tom's hat on Dick's head, to find that it threatened to take

him in, head and ea s. But hoping he would not be so particular about the paper band as Tom had been, he left that for adjustment presently, and turned smilingly to Tom with the hat he had taken from Dick.

"Now ve make dot all right mit you, my frient! You take my vord for dot; dis hat fit you like it growed on your head."

Tom immediately caught it by the sides of the brim with both hands, and began to tug to get it on. Failing in this he yelled:

"Tar an' ages! will I be robbed and ch'ated loike this? Give back me hat! At the l'aste I kin git on the insoide o' that wan; but what will I do wid this nut-shell, I dunno? That may do fur a Frinch Frinchman, but it'll niver do for an Irish Frenchman, bedad!"

And without ceremony he dispossessed Dick, and restored the smaller hat to his bump of "obfustification."

"My yo'ng frient," pleaded Abraham, turning to Dick, with no abatement of his smile.

And taking the offending hat, he made a great show of stretching it, and then replaced it on Dick's head, with the remark, in a confidential tone:

"Dose yo'ng shentlemens in Baris don't wear de hat so low down on de head. Ah!"—as if struck with keen admiration at the effect—"dot vos fine."

Having now succeeded in getting all three hats on their respective wearers, he gazed from one to another with growing enthusiasm.

"Shust wait vone leedle minute, yo'ng shentlemens!" he pleaded. "My wife shall see dot! She has been in Baris. Bote she not see any-ting like dis dose many years."

And running to a doorway at the back of the store, closed by a curtain, he cried:

"Rebecca! Rebecca! Come kvick!"

A wrinkled and round-shouldered old woman made her appearance; and Abraham dragged her forward, bespeaking her admiration of the aristocratic look which "de yo'ng shentlemens" derived from the hats they wore.

Rebecca lifted her hands and smiled, as if this were something to be enjoyed in silence.

"Come! come, Abraham," said Harry, who had had enough of the farce. "We don't want but one of these hats. What will you take for this one?"

A long and wordy argument followed before Abraham yielded to the fate of losing the sale of the two hats which fitted none of the party, and for which they had no use in any event.

At last, with a broken heart, as shown by the despondent s ake of his head, he fixed his price on the one which Harry wore.

"My brudder he knows dot markets better as I do! I imbord no more hats from Baris for Patty's Flat! Vone hat! Pst! dot vas no obshect. I gif you dot hat for fifteen tollar!"

Rebecca threw up her hand with a little gasp.

"Don't speak about it," said Abraham, sadly.

"I know dot hat cost me fifteen tollar unt a halluf. Bote dot's all right. Ve put dot in as a chob lot, unt don't keep no more silk hats."

"Fif-teen swindles!" cried Harry. "Look here, uncle! you can't come any of that on me. I've been on the Bowery as often as you have; and I know what silk hats are worth. I'll give you just seven dollars and a half for this hat, and that's five dollars too much."

The old man threw up his hands, turned his eyes to the ceiling, and gasped an appeal to the shades of his forefathers, in a hoarse whisper.

Rebecca clasped her wrinkled hands, and looked as if she were about to faint.

Then Abraham was seized with a frenzy of excitement. He caught up the hat, and turned it round and round, drawing attention to the nap of the silk, to the quality of the band and binding, and the lining of the under side of the brim; he turned the sweat-leather inside out; and even the paper lining came in for its share of praise.

And could he sacrifice such a treasure, such a marvel of workmanship? Call it twelve dollars and a half, and he would never face his brother again!

"Seven dollars and fifty cents!" said Harry, remorselessly.

Then the unhappy descendant of the Patriarchs smote his forehead and plucked at his beard. Had the God of his ancestors given him over to destruction, like Job of old?

The old lady frowned, and muttering something to him which was unintelligible to the Three Jolly Pards, gathered up all of the hats, to take them back to their place under the counter.

But Abraham took from her hand the one that Harry had decided upon. No! no! the "yo'ng shentlemens," his "goot frients," would

not ruin him. But, come! he must have something for the time spent in showing them the goods. Make it ten dollars; and he would go away and hide his head; for never had such a disgrace fallen upon a business man!

"Come on, fellers!" said Harry. "We can't trade here."

But Abraham followed them to the door. Was there nothing else he could show them? He had recent "imbordations" of all sorts.

But no! they wanted nothing from a man who sold a two-dollar-and-a-half hat for fifteen dollars.

Ten dollars!—he had said ten! The ghost of his dead grandfather, the great merchant of Dresden, had heard him say ten, and yet had not risen up out of his grave! He would say nine, for the love he bore them, but that the very stones of the Temple would cry out against him!

But the Pards passed out and kept on down the street, though he followed them with entreaties.

Well! well! if they were so hard of heart—if the sight of an old man standing amid the ruins of the fallen house of a long line of merchant princes would not move them—they should have the hat. They would need it in their entertainments; it might be the turning-point in their success. Never be it said that he had stood in the way of their advancement! It would dry up the blood in his veins; but they should have the hat for seven dollars and a half, if they had not the grace to make it eight.

He ran back and got the hat, and brought it to the door, and so enticed them back into his den—"like the owld spidher that he is!" said Tom.

But by this time Harry was doubtful as to their need of the hat, especially as they might soon visit Frisco professionally, where they could get a superior article for three dollars at the outside.

The skirmish of wits ended by Abraham throwing in a hat-box, and receiving his seven dollars and a half with secret jubilation.

"It is spoiling the Egyptian, my Rebecca," he said, in German, which to the Pards was, of course, as bad as Hebrew. "I expected not from them more than five dollars, if Heaven was willing to reward thy life of piety and my loyalty to the traditions of His Chosen People."

The pards then proceeded to their other purchases, fighting every inch of the ground.

But in the midst of this higgling came a startling interruption.

They heard a short, sharp scream, followed by the rending of the curtain which hung in the doorway through which Abraham had summoned Rebecca.

All turned, to see a girl in the act of falling from a tipping chair. She had evidently climbed upon the chair, to peep over the top of the curtain at the pards; an incautious movement had overturned her rickety support; she had clutched at the curtain to save herself, only to have it fetch away in her hand and betray her to the astonished gaze of those in the store.

The Three Jolly Pards stared in utter amazement. In the instantaneous glance that was afforded them while the girl was falling, they discovered that she was certainly not more than seventeen years old, and of the most flower-like beauty that they had ever beheld. Yet the existence of such a person in Paddy's Flat was, they knew, wholly unsuspected by any one save the old Jew and his wife.

Rebecca uttered a wild wail of terror and anguish, like the cry of some wounded animal, and darted toward the doorway.

The Pards were seized with the same impulse—to see more of the strange beauty, who had disappeared from their gaze like a flashing meteor, uttering not a sound after her first involuntary cry, though her fall must have been a painful one.

They would have rushed pell-mell after the old Jewess; but Abraham, who was between them and the doorway, whirled round and faced them, extending his arms to prevent them from passing him.

He said not a word, nor uttered a sound; but his face was startling to look upon. It was ghastly white, and drawn with a fierce, hunted look, the lips curling away from the teeth, the eyes flashing defiance, while his shriveled body was drawn together, as if braced to receive a shock.

But this lasted only an instant. The next he was fairly fawning upon them, clinging to them with trembling hands, and appealing to them with quivering voice, while he almost sunk upon his knees before them.

"Ah! shentlemens! goot shentlemens!" he

cried, "you vill not ruin me! you vill not bring destruction on my child! you vill not slay the mutter in her olt age mit grief unt despair! You know de vild mans dot liff here. Vat care dey for de despised Jew? I hide my vone treasure, my vone ewe lamb, from dese wolves! Bote, in vone unhappy moment, de Gott of my fathers has forsaken me! You haf seen her! Bote you vill not tell?—you vill not make her de prey of dese rutless monsters? Vat shall I gif you? Take all dot I haf! Monish!—ah! vat joy can dot bring, if my child lies like de poor leedle fawn in de toils of de serpent? Take all! all! but do not—"

But Harry interrupted this, and, joined by his pards, soon satisfied the old fellow that his secret was safe from betrayal by them.

Then, to escape his gratitude, they hastily took their leave, their hearts swelling with generous emotion, their imaginations fired with wondering admiration of the mysterious beauty, —a rose, as Harry said, growing in a bramble-bush.

Said Dick:

"De latest imbordation from Baris!"

CHAPTER IV.

A CAUTIOUS GAME.

"LOOK a-hyar, Banty!"

"Waal, Cale, what's the word?"

"This hyar p'ison peggin' away fur nothin' a day and find yerself, is about played out!"

"I 'low as findin' ourselves is about all we've found lately."

"S'pose we shake it fur a lead with less surface dirt an' a dead sure thing or hard-pan?"

"All right! Nary another pick goes into the ground in *this* hole. Now trot out yer soft snap."

"Hang it all, you won't drop!"

Banty dropped his jaw, at any rate, while he stared inquiringly at his companion.

He must have seen something of peculiar significance in the face that scowled down at him with the sullen malignity of a discontented demon, for a decided change came over his manner.

In the side of the prospect hole he gouged out a step with his shovel, then threw the shovel out upon the surface. Driving the point of his pick into the ground at a little distance from the hole, he grasped the handle, put his foot in the step he had cut, and so leaped out.

He then seated himself on the blade of the shovel, took a scraggly bit of tobacco from his pocket, whittled a portion of it into his palm, stuffed it into a little black pipe which he took from the band of his hat, and lighted it with nice deliberation.

Finally he crossed his legs comfortably, and found speech.

"Now, pard, you've got somethin' on yer stomach. Out with it!"

Cale Burchard changed color under the cool, questioning eye that was bent upon him. He laughed nervously, and hitched about, ill at ease.

"Waal, blow me ef you hain't laid yerself out fur somethin' large!"

"Make no mistake, Cale. I've traveled this wide world over, ye onderstand, an' I 'low to know when a man's a-gittin' of himself in shape fur to talk biz. You're about to the stickin'-p'int, all but a leetle cave in yer sand."

"Sand be blowed! I allow to hev as much sand as the next galoot."

"Waal, I ain't afeard o' you, ef you ain't afeard o' me. Now, let's hev it; an' no whippin' o' the devil round the stump."

Standing with his teeth set, his hands clinched, his brows knit moodily, Cale Burchard looked piercingly into the face of the man before him.

"Banty," he asked, slowly, "do you like work?"

"No, I don't. Do you?"

"Not by a dog-gone sight!"

Then dead silence fell.

Banty waited. It was plain that he was not showing his hand till the game called for it.

"Suppose," said Cale, like a man who was feeling his way with his foot in the dark, "suppose you seen yer way clear to lettin' somebody else do the cradlin', while you come in at the end o' the run an' done the cleanin' up."

"That 'ud be right in my line."

"Eh!"

"Yes."

"You have?"

"Have you?"

Cale came to a dead halt. His hands felt clammy; and unconsciously he passed them one over the other with a wringing motion. The sweat had started, too, in a circle just about

his mouth, and he felt tremulous in the legs, like a man who has risen from a bed of illness.

He began to swear savagely.

"Thar's a lot o' stool-pigeons in this hyar camp, as don't do nothin' all day but set around an' rake in the dust that better men has sweat fur!"

"Seems to me that things is run in about that kind o' style in most camps that I've struck."

"I, fur one, am tired o' bein' in the gang what's doin' all the sweatin', an' that's a fact."

"Waal, say!" burst forth Banty, with an abrupt change of voice and manner. "I know a leetle schoolmarm what's got more sand than you have—an' that's flat!"

"Yes, ye do!"

"Thar was a dude from the bay what come a-shinin' up to her; an' before she got the snaffle on him he flew the track, an' went roamin' with another daisy. So our leetle schoolmarm dropped in on the boss bruiser o' the place, an' 'lowed she was famishin' fur gore, an' as how she had the rocks to pay fur it. An' hang me ef she didn't git it, an' come down with a fistful o' sawbucks in strictly business-like style."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Why hain't you the gall to say what ye want, an' not keep me settin' hyar holdin' the strings to your gas-bag?"

Then Cale "made a dead break."

"Air you on the make?"

"You bet I am," was the prompt and direct response.

"Straight or crooked?"

"I kin stand what you kin."

"Then why hain't you said so before?"

"You never asked me."

Then the hands of these rascals met in a clasp of fraternity, a pledge of mutual loyalty.

"What's yer leetle game?" asked Banty.

"Waal, I 'low as old Abraham'd orter hev a purty leetle pile salted down some'rs. He's been cheatin' the boys long enough."

"I've thought o' that myself."

"It's a whack, then?"

"Give the word."

And the thing was done.

"But we don't want to shake this thing, then."

For answer, Banty tossed his pick and shovel back into the hole, jumped in after them, and resumed his work.

Cale shouldered his basket of pay-dirt, and trudged off to the cradle.

That night was "as ugly as they make 'em." It was all fair, with a full moon, until about nine o'clock; but then the demons of the tempest "cut loose," and pandemonium reigned until midnight.

The Three Jolly Pards were out to what they called their "rehearsal room," and were detained until the rain let up. As they trudged into camp, discontented enough, they were startled by a piercing scream.

"An' what's that?" cried Tom.

There was the grating sound, followed by a bang, of a hastily-raised window; and then the voice cleft the air like a knife.

Shriek after shriek followed one another as rapidly as breath could be drawn.

"Good heavens! it's over at Abraham's!" cried Harry.

"Dat's de daisy!" suggested Dick.

That was enough. Without the exchange of another word, the Pards "broke" for the spot.

CHAPTER V.

A FLASH IN THE PAN.

THE rain had ceased but the night was of inky blackness. The last stool-pigeon had been turned into the street, to stagger away to the wretched hut, scarcely more than a dog-kennel, which he called his home; and all of the saloons and dance-houses were deserted and dark and still.

The only objects astir in Paddy's Flat were two dusky forms that skulked along in the gloom like coyotes sneaking about a hunter's camp.

"We're hunk-i-dee on the outside," muttered Cale Burchard. "Thar ain't nobody layin' out sich a night as this, unless he's so blind drunk that Gabrael's horn wouldn't rouse him."

Banty replied with an execration against the mud, as a splash, followed by a flounder, showed that he had stepped into a water-hole.

"Cheese it!" cautioned Cale. "You must be a Jumbo, by yer walk. What's the matter with ye?"

"Ef they drop to *you*, it'll be because ye make so much noise with yer mouth!" was the sullen retort.

"We'll talk that over later. Hyar we are! Hark! What's that?"

JNA

It was the rhythmic snore of a heavy sleeper. "Hang me ef he hain't got the winder open!" muttered Banty.

"That's natural enough. It's on the lee side o' the house; an' nobody'd be shut up in that sweat-box, ef he could have a vent as well as not."

"It's right into our hands, anyway. The winder might band with the dampness, an' sing out when ye went to raise it."

"All right. Now, give me a boost onto the shed; then I'll haul you up; an' we'll snatch 'em bald-headed."

Banty braced himself against the side of the "lean-to" which formed the kitchen, the main building being a story and a half high—that is to say, its upper rooms, in either gable, being directly under the roof, so that their ceilings sloped on either side.

Cale mounted on his confederate's shoulders, gained the roof, and helped him up in turn.

Then the two crept up the incline, and entered the open window.

They had no difficulty in judging of the disposition of things within, though it was so dark that they could not see the length of their noses.

The bed stood under one of the sloping sides of the room, with its head just beside the window, and the snoring showed that old Abraham lay on the front.

At a signal, Cale clutched the old man by the throat, while Banty cast himself across the bed, to get his hand over Rebecca's mouth.

Unluckily for the success of their scheme, the latter miscalculated the height of the sloping ceiling, which proved to be so low that he crashed into it with his head, and thus fell short of his mark.

The hand intended to seize Rebecca by the hair fell upon her face, smashing, alas! her nose out of its graceful curve. The other, which was to have closed her mouth, clutched her throat, but too low down to completely cut off her voice.

She woke with a wheezing scream.

Half-stunned, Banty swore with rage and pain, not loud enough to be heard beyond the walls of the house, but louder than he would have permitted himself if he had suspected the presence of another within them.

Cale was more successful. Old Abraham uttered not a sound, nor even drew breath, after the fingers of his assailant closed upon his throat.

Even his struggles were restrained by the weight of Banty's body, while he was further terrified into passivity by Cale growling into his ear:—

"Cheese it, boss! Ef ye kick up a muss, you're a dead man, sure's ye live!"

With a second clutch Banty retrieved his balk and closed Rebecca's mouth.

But then, when success seemed theirs, they found that they had calculated their game without knowing that there was a "joker" in the deck.

A startled cry came from the next room; then there was the rustle of straw, followed by the thud of bare feet on the floor.

"Mamma!" cried a terrified voice, while the speaker evidently stood in agonized suspense.

In their astonishment the two ruffians suspended their efforts, both turning their heads in the darkness to the sound, and waiting in breathless expectation.

Then the house rung with an ear-piercing shriek, and the occupant of the next room fled across the floor toward the front of the house.

"Heavens to Betsy!" cried Cale. "Thar's some one else in this hyar shebang!"

"A fool would know that by this time," replied Banty.

"What's to do?"

"You tell."

"She'll raise the camp."

"In blasted short meter, too."

"But that'll fix us. The ole bloke has got his rocks salted down whar we can't git at 'em in a minute."

"He'd be a fool ef he hadn't."

"But, slit my weasand! I ain't a-goin' to be beat like this!"

"How air ye proposin' to prevent it?"

"Hark to that!"

The window went up with a bang, and the clear, shrill voice winged the alarm to the four quarters of heaven.

"Knock the ole woman in the head with yer pistol-butt, and go in thar an' stamp the breath out o' that leetle devil's body, while I screw his secret out o' the ole man."

Banty was remorseless in his execution of orders.

With no more scruples than if he were only

knocking the ashes out of his pipe, he carried out the first part of Cale's instructions.

Then, with no further precautions, he burst into the next room.

There was just enough difference between the outer and inner darkness so that the window could be distinguished, and a dimly discernible spot of grayish white indicated that the girl was leaning out of the window in her night-dress.

The ruffian seized upon her as ruthlessly as he would have clutched a beast that menaced his safety, tore her away from the window, and dashed her to the floor.

No longer supported, the window went down with a bang.

With the breath half knocked out of her body by the concussion, the girl left off her shrieking, but moaned instead in abject terror.

This evidence of life and consciousness enraged Banty; and he was about to spring upon her and stamp her into silence, forgetful that, having taken off his heavy boots, he was barefooted; but just before the window fell he heard something which checked his murderous purpose.

"For the back of the house—make for the back of the house, fellows! We can get in off the roof of the shed, if there's nothing open below. But, say, Dick!—you guard the front, and drop anything you see trying to escape."

"Jit you leabe me 'lone fur dat! Ef an'thin' libbin' comes out o' dat winder, dah'll be some cold meat layin' roun' loose hyeah in de mo'nin'!"

The sound of several runners in the street emphasized this scrap of dialogue.

Banty waited for no more. He had the good sense to know when a thing was "played." He "broke" for the next room.

Meanwhile Cale was making desperate efforts to force the secret of the depository of his money from old Abraham.

"Harkee, ole man! We're after yer money. Talk quick! Whar is it?"

And relaxing his hold on the throat of his victim, he substituted, as a prompter, the point of his bowie.

But Abraham lay limp and silent. It was too dark to see whether he was unconscious or not.

"Curse you! air ye playin' 'possum?" grated Cale, between his teeth. "Rouse out hyar, ur I'll fix you so's money'll be below par with ye!"

And in a furious rage, he shook the old man with all his might.

But it was of no avail. Abraham's body was as inert as if dead.

Then, howling out a stream of profanity, Cale dragged it out of bed, upon the floor.

It fell from his grasp, and remained motionless, in a heap, as he had flung it.

"I've come down on him too rough; an' now the whole thing's knocked in the head!" growled the disappointed housebreaker.

But the difficulties in his way only roused his obstinacy.

"I'll make a strike fur it, anyway," he growled between his set teeth.

And he struck a match, determined to make a hasty search before the arrival of any one who might be roused by the screams from the front room.

It was a mad project—a slim chance to risk one's neck on.

But at this moment Banty rushed in from the other room.

"Drop it!" he cried, striking the match out of Cale's hand. "Air you bound to swing? They're comin', right in front of the house!"

And leaping through the window, he never stopped for anything, but slid down the roof of the lean-to to the ground, seized his boots, and ran as fast as his legs would carry him.

Cale was seized with a sudden vivid realization of his danger. Without stop or stay, he too sprang out of the window, and, like Banty slid off the roof.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PARDS TO THE RESCUE.

JUST a moment too late to catch the rascals—perhaps just a moment too late to catch a crack in the head!—Harry and Tom rushed round to the back of the house.

With his head and half his body out of the window, old Abraham was made distinguishable to the eye by the whiteness of his night clothes.

He was still more easily distinguishable by the ear; for he was yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Stop t'ief! stop t'ief! Hellup! hellup! hellup!"

"Give me a back, Tom!" cried Harry, in

whose ears those first, and far more musical, screams were yet ringing.

What had happened to her, that they had ceased so abruptly? Had she been killed? He had not a shadow of doubt that they had issued from those lips that had haunted him ever since his momentary view of them.

Tom braced himself against the side of the lean-to, and bowed his back.

Without a thought of his mud-laden boots, Harry mounted upon Tom's shoulders, and so reached the roof.

But, alas! the roof was as slippery as a greased pig's tail; the clay on his boots made them even worse; his headlong eagerness added the last thing necessary—incapacity; so up went his heels, and he shot off the roof like a ship off the ways.

Of course, coming down at the very point where he had gone up, he took Tom in his descent, knocking him sprawling, and himself rolled over and over on the ground.

And such ground! Remember, it had had a three hours' soaking in such rain as falls in the mountains.

"Be the powers o' mud!" ejaculated Tom, when, having got back into his body some of the breath that Harry had knocked out of it, he could express in speech the fun that was always bubbling up in him, no matter how serious the occasion.

He picked himself up, and stood with his arms held away from his body, the picture of comical despair, if there had only been light to see him by.

"I have well-grounded fears," he went on, "that clay gets dirtier the more it's washed!"

"This is no time for jokes!" cried Harry, angrily, as he in turn scrambled to his feet, soft lumps dropping from every part of his person.

"An' do yez call this a joke?" cried Tom. "Well, it must be wan o' that kind that makes ye laugh on the other side o' yer mouth."

"Give me another back!" commanded Harry, paying no further attention to Tom's humor.

"Be me troth! I never knew how to sympathize wid a doormat before!" said Tom, as with commendable resignation he once more braced himself against the wall of the lean-to, and bowed his back.

Harry mounted him without ceremony; but this time he sat down on the edge of the roof and kicked off his boots before proceeding further.

He next tore off his jacket, and wiped his hands passably clean upon it, so that they would be in condition for handling his weapons, if necessary.

He then climbed to the window, from which, in order to enter, he had to push old Abraham, who kept up his frantic appeal for help.

"What is it? What has happened? Are any of you hurt?" cried the boy, groping in the dark, with his real anxiety all for one.

The old man settled back on the bed, where he sat gasping and panting, swallowing spasmodically, to relieve the pain in his throat.

Banty's blow had been ill directed, in the dark. Rebecca had been dazed, not rendered unconscious.

She was up and groping about in the room aimlessly, in such confusion of thought that she could only raise her hands and let them fall again, while she moaned in German, quite unintelligible to Harry.

He could get nothing out of her. But where was that other? He could not hear her voice; and that was all he had to direct him to the Stygian darkness. He could not call to her, since he did not know her name. His only recourse was to go into the other room, and see if she was indeed dead.

Meanwhile, his voice directed to him the one he sought.

A hand touched him, and ran down his arm to his hand, which was at once grasped by it and its fellow. They were quite cold, no doubt with fear. But they were so small and soft and delicate in every way, that he recognized them at once, if that could be called recognition where he had had no previous knowledge save in imagination.

"Oh, sir! brave shentleman! you have safed us!" was breathed into his ear in the sweetest accents he had ever heard, their music not marred by the un-American accent.

Heard from old Abraham's lips, he had never particularly admired it; but from these, it was divine!

He at once caught both her hands in his, thrilled with the thought that she had recognized him by his voice.

"Oh, dear lady!" he cried, addressing her as he had heard beautiful heroines of the drama ad-

dressed by the heroes of the mimic world, "you have not been harmed?"

"No! no!" she replied, hurriedly. "But mamma! Let me get to her. Why is she moaning so?"

Harry reached out in the darkness, and getting hold of the old Jewess's hand, joined it with her daughter's, and leading them together toward the door of the front room, said:

"Go into the other room, and I will strike a light, and see what has been done."

"Ah! how can I—we thank you!" breathed the girl, again pressing his hand.

"It is I that should thank you," he replied, not perceiving clearly for what, but feeling that somehow he was under a debt of gratitude to her for the favor she had shown him.

Then he closed the door, and a moment later had a light burning.

The room bore evidence of the struggle that had taken place in it. The bed-clothes lay strewn over the floor; and a chair and small stand were overturned.

But there were no signs of blood. When old Abraham could be made to understand this, and that all had escaped without material injury, he was moved to tears of gratitude.

By this time the citizens of the camp were thronging about the house; and it occurred to Harry that the next moment might see a lot of them coming up over the roof of the lean-to.

"Listen!" he cried, grasping old Abraham's wrist, and checking the flow of his thanks. "You don't want to have any of the boys up here. Above all, there is no need of betraying the presence of your daughter. Go into the other room, and tell her to keep out of sight. I will go out now, and tell the boys that it's all over, and no harm done, so's to keep them from trying to enter the house and nose round."

"Ah! vat shall I effer say to you?"

"Say nothing! Business! Keep your daughter out of sight. Do you understand?"

"But, here! I have a better plan. Come to the window, and tell the boys yourself that it is all right."

"Shentlemens my frients unt neighbors," said Abraham, "I haf note vords to t'ank you dot you come so kvick to me in mine troubles. It is all righd now. Bote dese yo'ng shentlemens!—ah—"

"Cut it short, old man!" cried Harry, gayly, getting out of the window past him.

He let himself down to the edge of the roof, careful not to slide off; called for his boots, donning his jacket while they were being passed up; and so jumped down in the midst of the crowd with a laugh, as if the thing, considering how it had ended, was a good joke.

"But didn't the old lady sing out of that front window!" he cried. "She'll never die of consumption!"

"Whoo! I'm so glad I must hug somebody!" shouted Tom.

And before the significance of this was suspected, he ran from one to another, throwing his arms about them, and of course covering them with mud.

"Thayre's nothing like a distribution o' favors, boys," he cried. "Be me sowl, ye're all welcome!"

Such a "scatteration" as followed! The boys swore, but laughingly. They were used to rough jokes; and since the beginning of the show the Pards had been privileged characters in this respect.

But here came Dick round the corner of the house. The fun showed him that the danger, and therefore the necessity for his watching, was past; and he came round to have his share in it.

He got it!

"Whoo!" yelled Tom, louder than ever.

And seizing his pard, he waltzed him round and round, willy-nilly, until they fell over, and then rolled him over and over in the mud, until they were about the proportions of snow-men; but, alas! the material was anything but snow.

At last Dick freed himself, and scarcely knowing whether to take the thing in good part or to fight, cried:

"Consarn yo' pictur! what are you tryin' to git frough you, boy?"

"What's that?" cried Tom, in an injured tone. "Ain't we pards?"

"Yes, we is. But what o' dat?"

"An' don't we go shares an' shares alike? Harry's got his share, an' I've got mine; an', be the powers o' mud an' gobs o' glory! you'll take yours widout sweetenin'!"

The crowd laughed Dick out of his dudgeon, and he concluded to make the best of what was past remedy.

But was it all a joke? Those who had not

been out of doors in time to hear the girl's wild shrieks clearly could easily have been persuaded that this was only a little "side-show" of the Three Jolly Pards, who could not live without their "racket."

But Harry assured them that the farce had opened with every prospect of being a tragedy, and there was serious work to do yet.

There had been an attempt at burglary, which the timely arrival of himself and companions had nipped in the bud.

The boys expressed themselves with glowing indignation, in which performance Cale Burchard and Banty, who were among the most eager for news, did not "take a back seat."

Banty was the one to suggest that torches be got and the trail followed up while it was "hot." The mud, he said, would give an excellent opportunity.

Upon this proposal being carried into effect, the trail of the bare feet was followed to the street, where it was abruptly lost. The burglars had put on their boots, and from that point there was no way of distinguishing them from the hundreds of others that cut up the street.

Abraham could tell nothing; and there all clew was lost.

But in one secret heart there was a ferment of curses against the Three Jolly Pards.

"This is two that I owe 'em!" muttered Cale, with silent execrations.

"We're no rocks in on this first hand," said Banty, philosophically; "but we've nosed out a secret that'll be worth somethin' in the next deal. Throw 'em around ag'in!"

CHAPTER VII.

ABRAHAM'S "LEETLE GAME."

"REBECCA! Rebecca!"

Before old Abraham's door stood two donkeys one of which bore a side-saddle, to the fastenings of which the "sheeny" was looking in his nervous, fidgety way.

In response to his summons his wife came to the door.

She was dressed in the deep black of mourning, and a thick crape veil fell before her face. This she put aside, to speak to her husband.

"Vat you vant, Abraham?" she asked, in a thin, cracked voice.

"Pring along dot vip."

She dropped the veil, and turned back into the house.

Having fixed the saddle to his liking, Abraham presently went to the store door, to meet the black-robed and veiled figure.

Locking the door behind them, he took the whip which she had brought, and then helped her with that solicitude which her age seemed to require into the saddle.

His own beast was so small that the rider's feet almost touched the ground; yet he jogged off up the street beside his companion with an air of great contentment.

This was an every-day occurrence.

At first it had excited a great deal of surprise and not a little joking among the boys, who swore that never before had there been known a Jew who could find it in his heart to lock his store door while any one else was out of bed.

Of course, however in a mining camp there is little or nothing doing during the daytime, except on Sundays; and as old Abraham kept the only store of the kind in the Flat, he had nothing to lose.

It was a little odd that the old lady should always appear on the street so deeply veiled; but the boys readily set that down to some custom of her people.

"It's a Lord's mercy fur to keep her beauty under cover," laughed Cale Burchard. "It gives me sore eyes to look at her when I go into the store."

But Jim Gladden saw something else—old Abraham's care for his companion.

"He cottons to the ole gal in a way what many a younger man might take lesson from," he said.

"But who'd 'low as the ole rack a' bones would go joggin' about the country every day, when she'd orter be settin' in the chimney corner a-nursin' of her rheumatics?"

"Hang it all, Cale! ef thar's ary wry side to anything, you're bound to find it."

"Waal, I reckon they gits tougher as they gits older, so's they'll stan' more shakin' up without comin' to pieces."

Cale lounged off, with a furtive glance at his pal.

A little later Banty yawned, stretched himself, swore mildly at there being "nothin' doin'," and slouched lazily off.

But these were not the only ones who had seen old Abraham set out on his daily ride.

"Whisht, Dick! do yez moind?"

"What's dat, Tom?"

"The owld woman's a h'ape round-shouldered, ain't she?"

"Reckon you'll be roun'-shouldered too, when you's as old as she is."

"An' the walk of her!"

"Wouldn't look to hab her walk like a young gal, would ye?"

"I wondher, now," pursued Tom, in a changed tone, "do the likes o' yees take all that in, like thim gulls over yondher?"

"Look a-hyeh, boy! what's de matter wid ye? You's gittin' cranky in de upper story."

"Whisht, ye blatherin' omadhaun!" laughed Tom. "Ye think it's meself that's thryin' to sell yez; an', be the sowl o' me futt, but it's owld Abraham that's ladin' the lot o' yez be the nose!"

Dick rolled his eyes so as to view his comrade askance.

"It wouldn't sthrike yez, now, that the colleen would be wantin' the air now an' ag'in?"

"De gal! Dat shape?" cried Dick, struggling with the new idea.

"Padding?" said Tom, sententiously.

"Dat's so—golly! An' dat's de reason de ole woman keeps her vail down all de time."

"The owld woman, ye fool? An' how would it be the owld woman whin it was the little dairling herself?"

"But jist look at de sly dodge ob dat ole coon—habbin' de ole woman come to de do' an' show her face, so's nobody'd drop to dat leetle game!"

"An', be the same token, whayre's Harry?" asked Tom.

"He say he done gwine to take a leetle walk to stretch his legs."

"It's his conscience he's fur sthretchin'—the desaver! He's gone to git a pape at the daisy sheeny!"

"Frough dat vail?"

"Would she be fur kapin' that down whin she got out o' reach o' the camp?"

"Dat's so. Say, Tom! s'pose we take dat 'ah in?"

"I'm wid ye, me b'y!—as the toper says affectionately to the lamp-post."

And to this end the Pards set out, taking a short cut over the crags on foot, as they could not without detection follow up the donkey-riders on the mustangs of which they were now the proud possessors.

Meanwhile Banty had rejoined his pal.

"We're solid as a mountain!" said Cale, congratulating his comrade in crime on their freedom from suspicion.

"Yes," said Banty. "That leetle double knocked the boys clean out."

"But, talk about knockin'!—we was knocked. I'll sw'ar I never see any one about the shebang but the ole sheeny an' his dame. A gal, ye say! But what fur would he keep her corraled thar, an' nobody know nothin' about it?"

"What fur do you keep lambs folded? I reckon thar's wolves enough in this hyar camp to make it pay. The ole man's head's level; an' you kin bet on it."

"But I never hyeared o' sich a thing. Thar's gals in camps no better'n this'n."

"Not many o' that kind, boss; an' I've got money as says so!"

"Look a-hyar! how do you happen to know so much about her? You 'lowed to never have seen her."

"But feelin's believin', as well as seein'. 'Twa'n't no sack o' bones that I snatched away from that winder an' flung in the corner."

Cale started, with a sudden lighting of his face, and an explosive oath.

"Say! That lets us into as soft a thing as you ever see!"

"Into what?"

"Why, we'll collar the ole galoot's shekels yit!"

"Easy. But how?"

"What's that I said to Jim Gladden—blast him! Didn't I say that that ole bone-yard wouldn't go rattlin' herself all around the country, when she'd be in better business coddlin' her rheumatics in the corner?"

Banty uttered an oath of surprise. He had caught Cale's idea.

"An' now," pursued Cale, "can't we make that ole duffer come down handsome?"

"Fur us to keep his secret?"

"Secret be blowed! We're a healthy pair to keep his secret!"

"That's so. He couldn't rake up tougher citizens fur to keep it from."

"We'll lay fur the pretty; we'll gobble her up like a June bug off a sweet-pertater vine; an' we'll hold her fur a ransom—that's what we'll do."

"A ten-strike! He'll come down in lavish style. What we want first, is a place to keep her; an' I've got my eye on it already."

"Business is business. The sooner we git to work, the sooner we'll be fingerin' his skads."

"We kin have everythin' in shape in half a day."

"But we don't want no mistake. S'pose we foller 'em up, an' work the thing down fine. Ef it's the gal sure enough, she'll have that vail up the minute she gits whar it's safe."

"Come along, an' say no more about it."

So it happened that the Three Jolly Pards and the two arrant knaves went on the same quest at the same time.

Who would win?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VAIL RAISED.

It was true that Harry Keene had "dropped to the racket," as the rest had; and instantly had come the longing to see, aglow with the mantling of rich young blood and radiant with gladness, the face that had fascinated him even when pale and drawn with fear.

But here was something which he could not share with his pards. He could not bear the idea of their prying into her secret. He wanted to protect her from everybody—but himself!

So he went off by himself, to lie in hiding where he might see her pass.

On the first day, he got no glimpse of beauty to repay his toiling on foot along the mountain road and among the almost pathless crags. He saw only that black-robed and veiled figure, jogging sedately along, and conversing in low, staid tones; but he discovered where they left the mountain highway, diving into a bridle-path that led away into unfrequented solitudes.

On the second day he went considerably in advance, and followed the bridle-path until it brought him to a glade so inviting that he thought she might there dismount, to gather the wild-flowers that peeped out here and there where the soil was favorable.

Snugly ensconced in a thicket which was made further impenetrable to the eye by an overgrowing vine, he waited.

The time seemed interminable. A thousand fears assailed him. That day they might take another route; she might be detained by illness; or she might have been overtaken by detection, and therefore danger, on the way.

He had worked himself into a fever of anxiety, so that he was almost ready to leave his covert and rush down the path to her rescue from the assault of some imaginary ruffian, when he was suddenly electrified by the sound of approaching hoofs.

Then his heart went off like an alarm clock. The drumming in his ears was so fast and furious that he could hear nothing else.

Had he been deceived? Was it only his imagination?

To get a clearer view, he thrust forward his head through the frondage, so recklessly that he came within an ace of betraying himself.

There they were, in all truth! Was her vail now put aside? The narrowness of the path compelled them to ride in file, and—of course!—how provoking!—the old man was before.

The eager watcher was treated to a view of only her donkey's head, as it was swung from side to side!

But he heard a little cry of delighted excitement that increased his impatience to get a view of the sweet lips from which it issued.

Presently a change in the course of the path threw them out of line, and then—ah, then!

Was there ever such a face?—cheeks of such soft and glowing olive! lips so vividly red! eyes so black, so liquid, so melting!

What a contrast with her body, which had been padded until all its flowing outlines were masked in deformity.

Harry felt a glow of indignation.

"That's infamous!" he almost cried aloud. "To think that she should have to make such a guy of herself! I'm blessed if I don't almost wish she would be found out, so that there would be no longer any excuse for this. Then we three could defend her from the most hardscrabble set in the mountains."

But already the excited girl had forced her way past her father, exclaiming:

"Ah! this is Paradise! How beautiful the world is! Dear papa! wouldn't it be nice if we could come to such a spot as this, and live here forever?"

"Miriam! Miriam! vas dere effer such a child as dot?" laughed her father. "Vell! vell! haf your own vay. It is my delight to see you happy."

Miriam! So her name was Miriam! What could have been more in keeping with her rare beauty? Harry had been almost afraid to hear it, lest it should prove to be one of those Hebrew names that are too closely associated with "old clo's" that "fit you like de paper on de vail!" But Miriam!—that was the essence of sweetness and tenderness.

As he had dared to hope, she slipped from the back of her mule, and ran and skipped about like a frisky kid.

She would not let her long riding skirt hamper her movements, but tucked it up until he could see her pretty, high-arched feet, incased in such shoes as he had never seen since leaving the Eastern metropolis. It was plain that, however miserly he might be in a general way, old Abraham spared no expense in providing for the comfort of his beautiful child. She was the one delight of his life. In the secrecy of his home, her unreserved affection repayed him for all the scorn of the outer world.

Harry had never thought of old Abraham except as a "sheeny", a vender of shoddy and Peter Funk goods at three times their real value, to whom lying and cheating were his principal stock in trade; but now, as he observed the tenderness with which the old man entered into the sports of his beautiful child, he saw that there was another and very different side to his nature.

He began to respect this man, whom every one else in the camp despised.

When Miriam had enjoyed the little glade to the full, and had gathered quite a little knot of flowers, she remounted and rode on.

Harry remained in his covert until she returned and passed him on her way home; then he descended into the trail and followed after, deep in thought.

Meanwhile Cale Burchard and Banty had shadowed Abraham and his daughter so well that they had tracked them into the trail, and had hidden themselves in a spot favorable for their purpose, between the point where the path turned off from the mountain road and the glade where Harry had lain in covert.

"Hyar they come," cried Banty, cautiously, as the objects of their quest approached on their return.

"Great Caesar!" ejaculated Cale.

Banty turned to look at him and learn the cause of so marked an expression.

Cale Burchard was peering through the interstices in the leaves with a strange, set look in his eyes, while his face had turned fairly purple.

He breathed hard, in a sort of hoarse pant.

"What's the row?" asked Banty, wondering-ly.

Cale glanced at the speaker vacantly, as if he did not comprehend what had been said, and then returned to his rapt gaze at the girl who was jogging along all unconscious in the trail below.

A strange, "creepy" feeling came over Banty.

"I wouldn't want him to set his peepers like that on anything that belonged to me!" he reflected. "He looks like a wolf!"

Miriam was in advance of her father, now gayly singing a snatch of a song, and now stopping to clap her hands with a gleeful laugh, as she saw a cony scamper across the path.

"Oh! see, see! If we could only catch the dear little creature!"

But her father called to her warningly:

"My child, ve are trawing near de roat. Be careful. Some vone may be passing, unt hear you."

At this reminder the color faded from the girl's cheek, and all the gayety died out of her face. A frightened, alert look took its place, and she hastily dropped her vail, and rode on in the sedate way suited to her assumed character of an old woman.

"It pains me, my tear," said her father, "to put a tamper on your pleasure. Put ve must pe careful, ferry careful."

"Yes, yes, my papa," she replied, prettily. "But I had almost for gotten."

Banty looked at his pard.

With his eyes still following every movement of the girl with that hungry stare, Cale was feeling behind him, as if groping for his revolver without clearly knowing what he was doing.

"Hold on, pard," whispered Banty. "What's the matter with ye? You don't propose to spring this thing before we're ready fur the game?"

Cale recovered himself with a long-drawn sigh as the girl who had fascinated him disappeared round a bend in the trail.

He turned and seized his companion by the wrist with a grip that made him wince.

"Look a-hyar," he said, huskily, staring into Banty's eyes. "You kin figger fur the rocks. I wants the gal herself! This hyar's jest what I've been bankerin' arter all my life. Hang these strappin' hussies what hangs around the settlements, says I! I wants somethin' super-fine, an' hyar ye have it!"

"You've got it bad, ole man," observed Banty, with no particular sympathy.

"An' this hyar's what that ole stoughton-bottle hes been keepin' under cover," pursued Cale, not heeding the other. "I had it in me to drop him whar he set."

"Yes, an' you'd 'a' made a purty mess of it. Now look a-hyar, Cale; you've got a beastly way o' lettin' the blood git into yer head, an' then you're clean off. You'll never make nothin', you won't, unless you've got somebody by to put on the brakes when you git to goin' down grade."

"You kin put on all the brakes ye like. I'll do as I blame please."

"You won't do nothin' to interfere with my gittin' the rocks I'm after, an' don't you disremember it!"

Banty spoke coolly, but with a deadly glitter in his eyes. Whether Cale heeded him or not, it was a fact that he was treading on dangerous ground when he ran counter to the cold-blooded villain whom he had chosen as his pard.

"But that's neither hyar nor thar," said Banty, recovering his usual balance. "The one way will sarve us both. Now to map the thing out so's thar won't be no balks. We're sure o' the gal. That's one thing."

"You bet! an' a big thing at that."

"Then we want to arrange whar we're proposin' to lay fur her. We want a better place than this—not so near the road. Then, how we're goin' to keep her."

"Don't you worry about that thar. I'll guarantee to keep her fast enough when I onc't git my hooks onto her!"

"Then how air we goin' fur to squeeze the rocks out o' the ole man without givin' her up accordin' to contract?"

"Blast the ole Jew! What's a contract with the like of him?"

"Hush!" cried Banty, suddenly. "Hyar's some one comin'!"

"Mebbe we ain't the only ones as has dropped to the leetle game."

"Look at thar! It's one o' the Pards."

It was indeed Harry, returning so deep in thought that he never dreamed of taking any precautions.

Cale uttered a savage oath.

"The three must be in it," he growled. "An' they'll knock us kitin'."

"No," objected Banty. "What has this one slied off by hisself fur, ef the others is in it?"

"Waal, then, ef we douse his glim while we've got the chance—"

"Right hyar in the path, to scare off our bigger game?" cried Banty, putting his hand on Cale's arm to restrain his purpose of instant assassination.

"Bah! Can't we pitch the body down in some gully? Let go!"

The readiness with which Banty complied showed that the consideration he had advanced was really the only one that had moved him to demur.

Cale noiselessly lifted the cock of his revolver and coolly took aim at Harry's head, resting his elbow on his knee to make his aim the more certain.

An instant later, and Harry Keene would never have known what had hurt him. But at this critical moment there came a saving interruption.

"Whurroo! Is this our foine Romeo, I dunno?"

"With a smothered oath, Banty darted forth his hand in time to seize Cale's revolver, so that his finger interposed between the cap and the falling cock.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ABDUCTION.

"WHAT in Cain d'ye mean?" growled Cale, striving to draw his weapon from the grasp of his confederate.

But Banty seized his wrist with his other hand.

"Don't be a fool!" he whispered. "Don't ye see that the rest o' the kids air on hand?"

"Waal, what ef they be? We'll bag the lot o' them."

"I'd be with ye fast enough, ef thar was a

dead-sure thing of our gittin' the lot. But suppose only one give us the slip, an' blowed the thing in the camp?"

"Hang the camp!"

"That's all right, ef you've got the sand to stand it. But ef you're fool enough to think you kin buck ag'in' Paddy's Flat, I ain't; an' I don't propose to put my neck in the halter jest fur the fun of a crack at these hyar youngsters."

Cale saw the force of Banty's argument, and when the latter let go his weapon and began to suck his bleeding finger where it had been wounded by the falling hammer, his more impetuous comrade said:

"Waal, maybe you're right. We hain't got no masks on now, an' ef they was to get a squint at us, an' then git away, we'd be goners."

Meanwhile, under the laughing glances of his pards Harry had colored high, and showed some resentment.

Tom and Dick had been less successful than Cale and Banty, and had failed to discover the Jew and his daughter until just as they were coming out of the trail into the mountain road on their return. So they had not yet confirmed their surmise as to the real character of the seeming old woman.

But Tom had proposed that they keep on into the trail and meet Harry. And now, having him "dead to rights," they were trying to force him to "own up," when they were startled by the bounding of a stone down the acclivity which rose on one side of the trail.

"Whisht!" ejaculated Tom, sharply.

"Dah he goes!" cried Dick, pointing upward through the undergrowth that clothed the face of the slope.

"There who goes?" asked Harry, looking excited but discovering nothing.

"A man! Didn't you see him?"

"No, I didn't. Did you see any one, Tom?"

"Well," said Tom, as if reluctant to admit the fact, "I didn't adzactly see anny one—"

"No, nor any two!" said Harry, sarcastically.

"But I did!" protested Dick, stoutly. "I seen a man dodge behind a bush up dah."

"Who was it?"

"I can't jist say dat."

"But you know everybody in the camp."

"But I jist seen his body. I didn't see his face."

"We can mighty soon find out," said Harry.

And he shouted:

"Hallo, up there!"

There was no response.

"Nonsense!" said Harry. "If you saw anything, it was an animal of some sort."

"But suppose dat was somebody what was layin' fur dat leetle Hebrew angel, jist like we-uns? Dey wouldn't gib 'emselves away, jist 'cause you hollered to 'em."

"But do you think that the whole camp is suddenly on the lookout for the girl, when they don't even know of her existence?"

"Two ob 'em does—an' a powerful bad two!"

There was something in that. Harry started and lost color.

"An' what air we standing here fur, wid our hands in our pockets?" cried Tom. "We ought to be up thayre routin' the spalpeens out, an' putting our mairk on them."

"Scatter!" cried Harry. "We'll mighty soon see if there is any one spotting her!"

With one impulse the pards leaped away up the acclivity.

Older heads might have been less fearless; they forgot the possible danger to self in their headlong championship of the beauty who had fired all their imaginations, though with a perfectly disinterested sentiment of loyalty in the cases of Tom and Dick.

But they had lost time in discussion; and as they had to beat the bushes as they went, their progress was so slow as to give the plotters ample time to get away quietly.

When they had searched half an hour without finding even footprints in that rocky soil, the pards again stood together, Harry looking at Dick suspiciously.

"Well, where's your man?" he asked.

"I don't care fur dat!" protested Dick. "I seen him!—dat's flat! Ef you don't b'lieve it, maybe you will when dey's dropped onto de leetle gal."

"Suppose it was a man. Such a thing as a girl may never have entered his head."

"What 'ud he run away from us for?"

"See here! You'd like to hang around here and play the guard over her, wouldn't you?" cried Harry.

"Well, now, thayre'd be some fun in that," interposed Tom.

"Hab it yer own way," said Dick. "I's done!"

They turned about and went toward the Flat, walking in silence altogether unusual to them.

Harry was troubled. Dick was "huffy." Tom felt that it was an unfitting time to crack a joke, and so he had nothing to say.

The more Harry thought of the ugly possibilities of the case, the more he feared to go on the supposition that Dick was practicing on his credulity in order to get his chance to see the girl.

Reaching the camp he went off by himself.

Tom favored Dick with a very marked wink.

"You played that wid the grace av an owld hand," he said.

"Look a-hyeh, boy!" cried Dick, indignantly, "dah wa'n't no gammon 'bout dat."

"That's all roight," said Tom, coolly. "I'm wid yez, annyways. What would the loikes av him shut us out fur, I dunno? Kape it up, an' we'll fetch him."

Dick protested still more earnestly.

"That'll go down wid him beca'se he's anxious," said Tom, with a laugh.

However that might be, certainly Harry concluded to be on the safe side. From that day he and his pards mounted guard over the beautiful Jewess, going in advance into the trail, mounted and armed, ready for any emergency.

It did not take long for the plotters to discover this.

Cale was for "rubbing the pards out."

"Blast 'em!" he growled; "we might as well git shut of 'em fu'st as last."

But Banty objected:

"What air we after? Money, ain't it?"

"Of course it is."

"Waal, suppose we make sure o' that; an' then ef you think you're famishin' fur blood, you kin waller in it, fur all me."

"But jest let me give you somethin' to sleep on. Do ye fancy you kin wipe out all three o' them youngsters without kickin' up a row in this hyar camp what the dickens himself couldn't quiet? The boys swears by the Three Jolly Pards; an' don't you furgit it! They'll want to know who had a grudge ag'in' the lot of 'em. An' when that question's raised, a galoot of about your size is comin' in fur some attention. Jim Gladden won't furgit that you've sworn to git square with that little ducky; an' you may be invited to prove an *alibi* at a time when you won't find it none too handy."

"But they're layin' fur us. Will we be in any better fix ef they drop onto us spiritin' the gal off?"

"They won't do that, ef we manage right."

"Fix it yerself, then."

"Don't you see that they go fur up the trail, so's the ole man an' the girl won't come upon their mustangs?"

"That's all right. But what good is it to us?"

"Why, it gives us the chance to hook onto the girl nearer to the road. Once clear with her, they're welcome to what they kin make of the trail we leave."

"But the noise? One good yell will fetch 'em down on us in a trice."

"Thar won't be no yellin', ef I have the runnin' o' the thing."

So Banty disclosed his plan, and convinced Cale that it would work.

On the following day they lay in wait at a point where the rocks closed in upon the trail, so that one riding through could almost reach out and touch them on either side.

At the usual time their prey walked into the trap.

Abraham was in advance. His companion followed sedately. It was so near the road that she had not yet lifted her veil.

Of a sudden, from the left of the trail, shot out a coil of rope, the noose at the end of which fell over Abraham's shoulders. Instantly it was drawn taut; and he was plucked out of the saddle, to fall to the ground with stunning force.

At the same instant a masked man stepped from behind a boulder on the right of the trail, which the lady had just passed, and cast a blanket over her head.

The donkey ridden by Abraham, feeling his master torn from his back, turned his head just in time to see the fluttering blanket, like the wings of a giant vampire; and with a bray of alarm he set off up the trail as fast as his heels could carry him.

"Fur God's sake, ketch that cussed donkey!" cried Banty, who was busy overpowering the struggles of his victim.

A muffled murmur came from the suffocating folds of the blanket, but not loud enough to be heard any distance; and when Banty stopped both mouth and nose with his hand, even that

was suppressed, and soon his victim lay limp and unconscious in his arms.

Cale, also masked, sprung down from his perch on the rock, and sought to release his lasso for use in recapturing Abraham's donkey, venting his rage in profitless oaths.

But Banty saw the futility of this.

"No good!" he said. "You've got to let him go."

"But he'll give us away!"

"Of course. But that's spilt milk. What we want, is to climb—an' lively, too!"

"But this cuss? He'll come round, an' be after us before our backs air turned."

"Hit him a leetle tap on the head, an' come on. A leetle one, mind ye. He's the hen that's to lay our golden eggs."

Banty was already running down the trail with his captive in his arms.

Cale bent down and struck Abraham on the head with the butt of his revolver, and ran after his colleague.

Soon they were mounted and spurring away at a breakneck pace.

Meanwhile the Pards were startled by the sudden appearance of a riderless donkey.

"They have been attacked!" cried Harry. "Come on! for heaven's sake, don't stop for any fooling now!"

They sprung to their horses, and went scouring down the trail.

"Look!" cried Harry, who was the first to catch sight of old Abraham, lying unconscious in the path.

The other donkey, a spiritless beast, which Abraham had got in his over solicitude in the safety of the child, was quietly nibbling the bunch grass which it could pull from the crevices in the rock.

The Pards leaped to the ground, and tried to rouse the old man and learn from him what had happened; but the attempt was futile.

"No use!" cried Harry, in a despairing tone. "We're only losing time. We know as well as he would what to do. Come on!"

Into the saddle again, and away!

"Dah ain't no trail what we kin make out," said Dick.

"We'll have to reason it out, then," said Harry. "They didn't go toward us. They wouldn't be likely to go into the open mountain road. Then there is nothing left for them but to dive into the first off-shoot."

"Dick, you keep on to the camp, and rouse everybody out—especially Jim Gladden."

"Shall I tell 'em all 'bout the gal?"

"Of course. Keep nothing back."

"You bet I won't! De mo' dey t'ink she's good-look'n', de fastah dey'll break deir necks after her!"

"Away you go! Don't spare horse-flesh now. Tom and I'll hang on the heels of—"

But the rest was lost as Harry swept through a mass of foliage, plunging into a narrow off-set from the trail.

"Did you see?" he cried to Tom, who was close behind him. "The branches were broken by some one coming in here before us."

And so the chase was begun. It was two boys after two desperate men. How would it end?

CHAPTER X.

INTO THE TRAP.

JIM GLADDEN was not an idler; so the chance of finding him hanging round the camp in the daytime, when he might be at work in his claim, was not very good.

But on this particular day it happened that he had lost or misplaced his plug of tobacco, and to get through the day without tobacco was even less to be thought of than going without food.

The result was that, on dashing into the camp as if shot from a Rodman gun, the first man Dick came upon was the "solidest" man in Paddy's Flat.

There was no lack of loungers, who were always waiting for something to turn up, if it was only a free drink; and the way one or two drew the backs of their hands across their mouths as Dick rode up, looked a great deal as if they had just been imbibing at Jim's expense.

"Oh, Jim! Jim!" shouted Dick, almost before he got within hailing distance. "You's jist de one I's after!"

"What's the matter?" asked Gladden.

"De debbil's broke loose! All o' you-uns git hosses as soon as ebber you kin, an' come along o' me."

"The pickaninny's gone crazy," laughed one of the men.

But Gladden saw that there was something serious back of this wild excitement.

"Simmer down!" he cried, seizing Dick by

the arm and shaking him. "Now, give it to us straight. What has happened to your pards?"

Dick was so breathless with hard riding that he could only pant and swallow, while he gasped out brokenly:

"It ain't dem. Dey's all hunk. But you know dat ole Abraham—"

And here he was compelled to stop for breath.

"An' his ole woman," supplemented Jim.

"No, 'tain't her neider."

"Then who in Cain is it, an' what is it?"

"You don't none o' you know dat cle 'coon Abraham got anodder one in his house—de puttiest leetle gal you ebber see! Oh, g'way! Dah ain't nuffin' like her on disside o' de watah-shed, nor on de udder side neider!"

"A child? Nonsense!"

"Who said a chile? You nebber see no woman what could git away wid her! I tell ye she's a young gal, 'bout fourteen or seibenteen years ole—"

"Oh, git along! What air ye givin' us?"

"He's got 'em in the upper story. Didn't I tell ye so?"

"It's Dinny McGee's bad whisky he's been irrigatin' with, sence he's corraled his pile out o' the show."

"True as ye lib!" shouted Dick. "Ef you don't believe me, ask Harry Keene."

"But how kin we ask him? Whar is he?"

"He's gone affah de debbils what stole her away—him an' Tom."

"You're gitting mixed. He's clean gone, as sure as ye live."

All of a sudden it flashed through Dick's mind that he would have difficulty in making the boys believe the improbable story of the existence in their camp of a pretty woman whom no one knew anything about.

He dropped his jaw, and stared helplessly. What could he say to convince them?

But once more Jim straightened him out.

"Now, look hyar, youngster," he said, "begin at the beginnin', an' give us this thing slow."

"Fo' de Lo'd, what I'm tellin' ye is true!" said Dick, earnestly. "Abraham has got a darter what's been libin' wid him all along."

"A daughter? Nonsense! we know better than that."

"But it's so, dough you don't know it. He's kep' her hid—"

"Hid? What for?"

"Reckon he's 'fraid o' you fellers. Dis hyeah's a putty hard camp fur a good-lookin' gal; an' mose o' you chaps use a Jew like as ef he was a Chinaman."

"An' do you mean to say that he has kept a girl hid in that house over thar?"

"Yes, I do! De fu'st time me an' my pards knew anyting 'bout it, she fell off a chair an' pulled down de curtain, an' we seen her plain. Den when de burgularians got into de house, Harry he seen her an' talked to her. You t'ink dat ole woman yell out o' de winder like you hyeah dat yell dat night?"

"By Jupiter!" ejaculated Jim, beginning to believe that there might be something in the story, however improbable.

"But how would she live, shut up in that barracks?" objected one of the eager listeners.

"S'pose she rig up like de ole woman, an' go out fur a donkey-ride ebbery day? What you t'ink she keep dat vail down fur, all de time? Me an' my pards found out whar she go out in de mountains; an' dah she lift up dat vail; an' ef you jest see her face onc't! Hi golly! I nebber see nuffin' like dat fur good-looks!"

"But what has happened to her?" asked Jim Gladden, with a sudden increase of excitement.

"De debils what broke into de house has run away wid her. Dat's what dey was after," affirmed Dick, as if he knew all about it. "An' Harry an' Tom is chasin' 'em up; an' dey sent me hyeah to rouse up de whole camp."

"Did Harry Keene say that?" asked Gladden.

"Yes, he did."

"That settles it! Boys, Harry Keene's nobody's fool. Ef he backs this thing, you may bet thar's somethin' in it. Trot out every hoss in the camp; an' them as can't git a mount come afoot. Come on!"

"Ef you don't b'liebe me," said Dick, with a sudden bright thought, "dah's de ole woman, layin' low while de gal's out in her duds. Rout her out, an' ask her."

"No," objected Gladden. "We won't set her to worryin'. Maybe we kin git the girl back before she knows anything's wrong, an' save her all that."

The confidence with which he spoke drew the others over to his belief in Dick's story; and in an instant the camp was a scene of the wildest hurry-scurry.

Dick rode beside Jim Gladden when the hastily-formed cavalcade swept out of the camp.

As they neared the point where the trail led off from the road, they came upon old Abraham, who was staggering along wringing his hands and bemoaning the calamity that had befallen him and his.

At sight of them he ran forward, crying out in his distress, while the tears coursed down his cheeks:

"Oh, shentlemens! shentlemen! pity de misfortunes of a boor olt mans! De light of my life has gone oud! Safe her! safe her, shentlemens! Goot shentlemens! kint shentlemens!"

"Come on!" shouted Gladden. "Don't waste time on that old fellow! We'll fetch her through, Abraham!—don't you worry."

"Gott pless you!" was all that the grateful Jew could murmur, as they swept by him.

Now Jim Gladden's blood was up. His eyes blazed with righteous indignation. Woe betide the abductors, if he got his hands on them!

Meanwhile, far in advance of these pursuers—for much time had been lost in Dick's ride to the camp and back—the criminals had fled away with their prize.

Their horses had been secreted just within the branching trail into which the Pards had followed them.

Upon mounting, Banty had given his burden up to Cale, as better able to carry it by reason of his greater size and strength, besides being better mounted.

The brutality of the larger villain was such that he took the limp form like a sack of meal, with no thought beyond the fact of possession.

In the excitement of flight Banty did not think to take notice of what his companion might be doing; and it was only by accident that some time later a turn in the path brought under his view a spectacle which caused him to cry out:

"Good heavens! have you got that blanket over her head yet?"

"What's the matter with that?" asked Cale, gruffly.

"Matter!" cried Banty. "You'll have her smothered—that's all!"

Cale replied with a muttered oath.

However, he drew the blanket from over the woman's face, fetching the vail away with it.

But then, at sight of the bloodless face, he abruptly drew up his horse, and burst into a torrent of wild blasphemy.

"What's the row? Is she dead a'ready?" asked Banty.

"Dead!" shouted Cale, with another flood of profanity. "I've a mind to crack every bone in her blasted carcass!"

Banty looked, and himself uttered an enraged oath.

"What air we to do about it?" asked Cale. "A purty mess this!"

"Do?" repeated Banty. "What kin we do? We'll keep what we've got, an' make the most of it."

Cale replied with a stream of senseless imprecations.

"One thing," said Banty. "We won't waste no time in palaver. Hark! Do you hear that?"

As they had brought their horses to a standstill, they were enabled to hear sounds that would have been drowned by the clatter of their own hoofs if they had been in motion.

The sound that had caught Banty's ear was the sharp ring of iron upon flinty rock. It was the "click-a-click" of a horse at full gallop, which made its character unmistakable, though it was heard but twice.

"It's them cussed leetle mongrels!" growled Cale.

"Only two of 'em," said Banty. "Didn't you hear, as they crossed that vein of rock?"

"Whar's the other one, then?"

"Whar, but tearin' away fur the camp, to fetch all of Paddy's Flat after us."

"That comes o' your not lettin' me alone, when I proposed to give the lot of 'em their quietus. Now I'm goin' to take the bit in my mouth, an' carry one thing through with a rush."

"What's that?"

"I'm goin' to ambush them sassy leetle whelps, an' leave 'em behind to show that thar ain't nobody's fool playin' this hyar hand."

"I hain't nothin' ag'in' that."

"An' hyar's jest the place fur our game. To cover!—you on that side, an' me on this."

In an instant the trail was deserted, showing nothing to warn the Pards of the trap that had been set for them.

A few minutes later Harry and Tom came tearing along, bent on overtaking the abductors

and snatching the prize from their villainous hands.

As they swept over the spot, Cale Burchard leaped into view, crying:

"Now I've got you, ye—"

But the crack of his revolver and a sharp cry of warning from Harry, who was in advance, drowned the rest.

With a scream of alarm, Harry's mustang leaped high into the air, and went down with a crash, carrying his rider with him.

Tom saw another masked assailant appear on the other side of the trail, heard the crack of his revolver, and felt as if some one had struck him a powerful blow on the shoulder.

At the shot which sent Harry to grass Tom's mustang had reared with a snort, and so carried his rider's head out of line with Banty's weapon.

But this abrupt arrest of his progress, followed by a pivoting motion, while the beast pawed the air, unseated Tom; and he was only conscious of a crash and a scramble, when he found himself under cover, but with the delightful sensation of being liable to receive a bullet from any quarter, and cold with the fear that his pard had "chipped in."

CHAPTER XI.

"SOLD!"

BUT our hero's good luck did not desert him at this critical moment.

The hot-headed Cale had been maddened by a disappointment which will presently be disclosed. Now, finding the youth who had already once frustrated his plots hanging so persistently upon his heels, he felt a ferocious impulse to get at him and tear him with his hands, and and so stepped toward him at the instant of firing.

This movement deranged his aim; and as the frightened mustang leaped upward, flinging his head wild, he received the bullet in his neck, so that it struck the spine just below the base of the brain.

Harry had only time to kick his feet out of the stirrups, drop his right hand to the pommel of the saddle, and give a spring, as in playing leap-frog over a post.

He alighted upon his feet, took two or three plunging steps, and plowed the ground on his knees. But a vivid expectation of another shot from behind kept him going without pause, until he had got clear of the open trail, behind a sheltering rock.

"All right, Tom?" he shouted, his first anxiety for his comrade.

"Whurroo!" yelled Tom in response, delighted with the assurance that his pard could speak up in such chipper tones.

In the exuberance of his spirits, his native propensity for fun got the better of prudence, and he kept on, with a laugh:

"Now we've got these gints fore an' aft; an' we'll howld the fort till the b'ys come up."

"Cheese it!" cried Harry, who knew the danger of betraying their exact position to the enemy by the sound of their voices.

But he did not dream of a folly which Cale Burchard committed, and so was wholly unprepared to take advantage of it.

To see both of the young scamps escape out of the trap he had sprung upon them, and then mock at him, drove Cale wild.

"You gobble up that leetle whelp," he cried to Banty; "an' I'll jump this'n's claim fur him."

And, having learned nothing by experience, he plunged after Harry headlong.

That gave Tom the chance he was "aching" for.

Crack! went his revolver; and the incautious ruffian clapped his hand to his head, with a shriek of pain and fear and rage, and fairly dove sideways into the covert beside the trail.

"Stick a pin—"

But Tom's exultation was cut abruptly short by a feeling as if some one had laid a rod of red-hot iron across his back; and he realized that the smoke from his weapon had made him a mark for Banty's aim.

He did not utter another sound, nor move. If he had been shot through the head, the effect could not have been more instantaneous.

But Banty was far too wary to act on the assumption that his shot had been so effective. He was not likely to take example by Cale's passionate folly.

And now began a season of regular Indian fighting.

The Pards had the advantage of having their enemies between them, with no chance of escape without exposure to their weapons, save up the sides of the gorge; while every minute gained in maneuvering brought help nearer. The abductors could not afford to wait; while that was the rescuers' "best holt."

But another shot which threw dirt in his face warned Tom that he had better emigrate to a cooler clime; and he began to slide away, being careful not to agitate the undergrowth; while Harry returned the compliment for him, causing Banty to wince and reflect on the hazards of the four-handed game they were engaged in.

From that on, there were no further signs of life near the spot, until the gulch re-echoed with the clatter of approaching hoofs.

Then, at quite a distance from the scene of warfare, where he had worked his way back over the trail, Tom made his appearance and called to his friends:

"Here ye are, boys! We've got 'em cooped up beyant thayre, if the divils haven't fetched Harry."

"Whar air they?" cried Jim Gladden, drawing his revolvers for instant and decisive use.

"Not tin rods below. Thayre on ayther side o' the thrail."

"Who air they?"

"I'll niver tell yez. Sure, I dunno."

"But didn't you see 'em?"

"Faith, I did—an' felt them, too. But the murtherin' divils were masked."

"But didn't they say nothin'? Couldn't you tell by their voices whether you knowed 'em or not?"

"Well, I'll tell yez no lie about it," replied Tom, with comical frankness. "I was so scared to death wid what they was doin', an' wid the lively way they had o' doin' it, that I didn't attind to the sp'ache o' them so strictly as you would, fur instance, av a pilgrim was axin' yez the way to the nearest bar!"

By this time they had reached the scene of the skirmish, and if Harry was able to "show up," he ought to do it.

But nothing was heard from him, though they shouted his name.

"Air you sure it was here?" asked Jim Gladden, looking white and anxious.

"Av coorse!" affirmed Tom. "Ain't that his mustang layin' thayre?"

True; the animal Harry had ridden lay there in the trail, a terror to the others of his kind that the rescuing party rode up.

They stiffened their fore-legs and refused to advance, snorting and trembling with fear.

"They've fixed him!" said Dick, with a sob in his voice.

"No they hain't!" cried Tom, his breast swept by a sudden storm of fury.

"Beat the bushes, boys!" cried Jim Gladden, himself dismounting and setting the example.

Dick joined in the search, with the evident dread of coming upon the body of his comrade stark and still in death.

Tom rushed about like a maniac. Now he called upon his chum, and now he shouted out imprecations against his murderers.

But one course was as fruitless as the other. Harry was neither seen nor heard. Not a vestige remained of him or of those whom he had sought to circumvent, or of her whom he had undertaken to rescue.

"Look hyeah! dis ain't right," cried Dick, plaintively. "Dey's sperited him off, an' de gal, an' all!"

"Right from under me nose!" cried Tom, disgusted with himself.

"But they couldn't carry him off bodily," protested Jim Gladden, "if you have kept any sort of watch. And what would they want with him, anyway?"

"Be 'asy," cried Tom. "They've sneaked out o' this, an' he's follied them—that's how it is."

"Come further down the gulch," said Jim to his men.

They went on, beating the bushes as they advanced.

Suddenly a great shout went up.

"Hallo! hyar's one of 'em, anyhow!"

"Is it Harry?" cried Dick, his heart sinking with the dread that his pard was done for, if he could not speak up for himself.

"No; it's the gal."

Then such a rush as there was to the spot! Every one was eager to see the beauty Dick had described in such glowing terms.

But a sentiment of loyalty to his pard stirred in Dick's breast.

"Hole on dahl!" he shouted, springing forward.

"None o' you galoots don't touch her vail!"

"Gammon!" cried the rough fellow who had made the find.

And without ceremony he stooped and exposed the face of the unconscious woman.

But he started back with a blank stare of amazement and a path like that which Cale Burchard had entered when he drew the blan-

ket from the head of his prize to see if he had not smothered her.

His nearest companions set up a shout of laughter.

"Sold!" cried one of them.

"Catch that young darky an' pin him up by the ears!"

There was a dive made for Dick, which he evaded with the dexterity of the famed "Paddy's Flea."

"What's de matter_dah?" he demanded, indignantly.

"Matter, you leetle blatherskite!" was the laughing reply. "What did you lie to us for?"

"Let him alone," interposed Jim Gladden.

"That's all right. Hal hal hal!"

By this time both Tom and Dick had got where they could see the cause of this marked change in the feelings of the crowd; and amid all the grinning faces, theirs were the only blank ones.

There was cause for their astonishment.

There lay the black-robed figure. But the pale face presented, not the lovely lineaments of Miriam, but the wrinkled visage of Rebecca!

And this it was that had caused Cale to swear so, when he discovered that he had caged the wrong bird.

After a moment of dumb bewilderment, Dick's mind was illuminated by one of his sudden inspirations.

He saw his chance to preserve the Jew's secret, even after it had been disclosed.

"Well, boys," he said, with a grin, "it didn't hurt ye none to tink dat dah was a purty gal what you was a-sabin'. You's felt mighty good all de way out hyeah—ain't ye, now? An' it fotch ye along a heap quicker!"

Then turning to Tom, he went on:

"Hyuh! hyuh! I tole dese hyeah gudgeons de toughest yarn you ebber hyeah'd, 'bout a lubly darter what de ole man had stowed away ober de sto'; an' how he fatched her out hyeah ebbery day fur to take de air, rigged out like de ole woman. An' de way dey sucked dat in—Hyuh! hyuh! hyuh!"

Tom "dropped."

"Kape yer foolin' fur some other time!" he said, with affected impatience. "Where's Harry? That's what I want to know."

The crowd was completely hoodwinked. The Pards had recently got up such a reputation for joking, that they took Dick at his word.

However it was no time for laughing. Jim Gladden was the first to think of this.

"Stand back, gentlemen," he said. "It's no joke to this poor woman; and you wouldn't want one o' your mothers laughed at fur bein' old an' past her good looks. Git some water, an' we'll fetch her round."

"We're a lot o' galoots, an' that's a fact!" exclaimed one of the roughest looking.

The quickness with which the crowd responded to this appeal showed that, rude as they were, their hearts were yet springs of generous impulse.

Water was brought in abundance; and the glowing young beauty they had expected to find could not have had more respectful and anxious attendance than was given to this shriveled old beldam.

Rebecca was soon restored to consciousness. She looked in bewilderment into the faces that crowded about her. She was quite weak; but hands gentle though rough assisted her to rise, and voices as kindly as they were unmusical assured her that she had nothing more to fear.

"I'll go an' tell de ole man dat he hain't nuffin' to worry about," said Dick, thinking of the necessity of putting Abraham on his guard, lest he should betray himself when the boys joked him about his beautiful daughter.

And jumping upon the first horse he found handy, he dashed up the gulch.

"See ef you kin make the ole sheeny b'lieve that this hyar lovely creeter—"

"You dry up!" interposed Jim Gladden, "choking off" the fellow who was calling after Dick.

"And now," added Tom, "whayre's Harry? They didn't git away wid 'im, that's plain; or they'd have stuck to the owld lady, fur the ransom."

Thereupon Jim Gladden divided his party; and while Rebecca was given an escort back to her husband, the rest went on in quest of Harry and the abductors.

CHAPTER XII.

"COME AG'IN."

HARRY KEENE had been wounded. A bullet, grazing his temple, left him "with a bee in his bonnet," the humming of which shut out almost every other consciousness.

He lay dazed for he knew not how long a time. Then he became dimly aware that his enemies had somehow outflanked him, and were below him in the trail, making good their escape.

Knowing that they could not afford to lose time skirmishing, while every moment brought nearer help from the camp, Cale and Banty had without consultation, both come to the same conclusion.

While not a sound betrayed the presence of anything living and moving in the gulch, they made their several ways up the slope on either side, and then turned in the direction of their horses.

There they met, and came within an ace of exchanging shots before they recognized each other.

"It's you, then?" muttered Cale, with a savage scowl. "I thought it might be that young—"

"Never mind who you thought it was," interrupted Banty. "It's time fur biz, an' not chin-music. The quicker we git out o' hyar, the more show we'll hev fur collarin' that money."

There was an ugly look in his eyes that his pal had not seen there before; and his voice rung with an iron determination. He looked like a man on his metal.

"But, hold on!" said Cale. "Air you goin' without the woman? How kin you strike the ole man without—"

"Woman be blowed! We can't go back after her. That comes o' your not fetchin' her along when we brought the hosses down hyar."

"We had to git 'em further away from the ambush, fur fear they'd make a noise, an' give us away. But the woman was still enough."

"An' you took it fur granted that we was sure to git away with the pards? Well, now you know that thar's nothin' so unsartin' as a dead-sure thing."

"But come on—this thing ain't played out yet!"

"But with not even a leetle pair in yer hand—"

"You'll see what we've got in our hand."

And Banty hurried his pard forward, leading their horses so as to make as little noise as possible.

Great as were their precautions, Harry, as we have said, heard them.

That humming in his head left him with just sense enough to know that he must follow them; and he immediately set out in pursuit.

But he was not sufficiently himself to think of signaling Tom to accompany him. Indeed, he quite forgot about his pard, and even about the captive whom he was seeking to rescue.

He was on foot; and he did not get near enough to his enemies to send them his compliments in the shape of a pistol-ball, before they mounted, and then steadily increased their distance, until he could no longer follow them by the sound of their horses' hoofs.

Then he wandered aimlessly, and got lost; and the daylight waned into darkness; and he lay down, and sunk into a long unconsciousness.

Meanwhile, Banty had led the way by a roundabout route back toward the camp.

"We're to hedge ag'in, air we, as we did after droppin' in on old Abraham, an' droppin' out ag'in with nothin' to show fur it?" asked Cale.

"Hedge be blowed!" replied Banty, compressing his lips.

Then he turned upon his companion with an expression of countenance that made Cale feel that, as much smaller as he was, Banty was his master in strength of will.

"Now we're whar we kin chin it without no cavedroppin'," he said, "let's have it out. Do you know me?"

"Waal," replied Cale, slowly. "I 'lowed to know you; but I'll be blowed ef I don't begin to think that you hain't never showed up all that you held in yer hand. Who air you, an' what air you, anyway?"

"I'm a bad man!" declared Banty, viciously—"the worst that ever struck this camp, I reckon. I've been playin' my purty sence I've been round hyar; but it's slow music, an' I'm sp'ilin' fur a quickstep. When you proposed this thing, I bailed it as a godsend; an' now you're about ready to cave, I'm jest woke up."

"I didn't give a tinker's cuss fur the gal. It was the money I was after; an' I'd as leave git it through the ole woman as any other way. But they've downed me twice runnin'; the thing's gittin' interestin'; an' now I'm in fur fun. I'm goin' fur 'em; an' I'll fetch the gal ur bu'st somethin'!"

"That's all right," said Cale, with less than his previous enthusiasm; for he did not exactly like Banty's new interest in Miriam. "But how do you propose to do it?"

"This much is plain: When the gal goes out, the ole woman stays at home; an' when the ole woman goes out, the gal stays at home."

"Yes."

"The kids was layin' fur the gal every time."

"I reckon they was."

"When the darky went to rout out the boys, you bet he told the thing straight, as he believed it. How many, then, do you suppose was left in the camp?"

"Mighty few, I reckon."

"That leaves the coast clear for us to cut in behind 'em, an' carry off the prize, after all."

"Capture the girl out of her own house?"

"Exactly. We've come the shortest way back. It'll be dark before we git into camp. The boys will waste time huntin' us. But, let them do the best they kin, we'll have half an hour the start of 'em."

"Come! it's a bold dash, an' we sweep the deck!"

Banty's eye glittered with the excitement of a desperate adventure. He was transformed. Cale could only follow his lead.

They rode into Paddy's Flat. The night had fallen, as Banty predicted. The camp lay deserted and dead. The lights that streamed from the saloon windows at this hour were not yet aglow.

Meanwhile Miriam had waited the return of her parents, with growing anxiety as the night fell without bringing them.

Never before had they stayed so long. What should she do if an accident had befallen them? She knew not a soul in the camp, save such knowledge as she had of the Three Jolly Pard, and what she had seen of the others by peeping through her curtain at them.

But of the men she was as afraid as if they had been so many wild beasts. In their apprehension, her parents had exaggerated their lawlessness.

But the Pard she liked, one and all; and Harry was her hero. She would believe nothing ill of him. She thought of him all day, and dreamed of him all night.

Oh, if she could but get speech with him now! He would soon relieve her anxiety.

If she had seen him while she was peeping from her window to catch the first glimpse of her returning parents, she would have run the risk of signaling to him.

Then her fears took another turn. Dick swept into the camp in the wildest excitement, and carried off all of the men at his heels.

What could it mean? Something desperate, she felt sure; for the men had looked savage and vindictive. Had something terrible happened to Dick's pard?—to Harry?

Then the girl fell upon her knees, and with white lips and tearful eyes prayed to the God of Israel for protection for all her loved ones.

But the night came down, and she cowered in terror. She dared not strike a light, though the darkening room seemed filled with stealthily-moving phantoms.

At last she heard the back door open, and some one entered. Her heart stood in her mouth; the blood surged up into her head so that for a moment she could hear nothing but its rush through her veins.

But the intruder, whoever it was, crossed the floor of the lower room with an assured step, and then came mounting the stairs without pause, like one familiar with the premises.

Could it be that her parents had returned without her hearing the step of their mules? She had been praying for she knew not how long, with a passionate earnestness that she had never before thrown into her devotions.

But the step—surely it was not her father's! It was too heavy; it was too firm and regular.

And there was another following it which she had not heard before—a cat-like tread! That could not be her mother's.

She rose to her feet, with her hands pressed to her bounding heart, facing the door of her room like a fawn driven to bay.

There was no preparation for resistance, but the dumb waiting for her fate. She could not have cried out, nor lifted a foot in flight, to save her life.

Then the door was thrown open, and the intruder crossed the threshold.

"Father, is that you?" she gasped.

Instead of a reply, there was a swift rush across the floor, and she felt her head enveloped in the folds of a shawl or blanket.

Now her chained energies were loosed, and she fought madly. But it was too late. She could

not make the slightest impression on the iron muscles that bound her.

She tried to cry out the name that had been in her heart for days, but she could not force it beyond her lips. Then came a sudden blotting out of all things. She lay limp and unconscious at the mercy of her captor.

"Give her to me," said Cale Burchard's voice in the darkness.

"An' now—git!" said Banty's.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

DICK met old Abraham half-dead with distress, now running forward with a funny, shuffling trot, now casting himself on the ground in despair, and all the while calling plaintively upon the God of his fathers.

With a word his fears were allayed and his grief turned to rejoicing; and when he was told of the care with which his secret had been retrieved after circumstances had led to its betrayal, his gratitude knew no bounds.

He embraced Dick with tears, and—if Dick was not joking when he told of it—would have kissed him, if he had not squirmed out of his arms. At any rate, he assured him that whenever the Three Jolly Pard wanted anything in his line, he would give them whatever they would accept, or sell them any of his choicest "imbordations from Baris" at cost price—"so sheep as never vas."

He then explained that Miriam had insisted on the occasional substitution of her mother for herself, though Rebecca urged that she no longer needed the exercise demanded by youth.

When the escort came up with the old lady and placed her in her husband's arms, the boys swore that it was good for sore eyes to see them cling to each other like young lovers.

Not stopping to see it, Dick dashed back over the trail in quest of his lost pard.

As Dick had anticipated, the captain of the escort guard chaffed Abraham on the youth and beauty of the "daughter" whom it "did him proud" to restore to him.

"I reckon," he went on, "after rescuin' sich a charmin' creeter, one o' the kids—Dick, most likely!—will be fallin' in love with her, an' we'll hev a weddin' at the Flat."

Rebecca turned white and faint, and clung to her husband with a gasp, not understanding the joke at her expense.

Abraham "smole a sickly smile," and turned the matter off cleverly.

"My daughter?" he said. "Ah! she is vife, unt child, unt mutter, unt all, to me!"

The donkeys were recovered; and the old folks headed the procession back to camp, jogging along as sedately as ever.

As we know, the darkness overtook them, though Abraham, considering his daughter's anxiety, hurried forward as fast as possible.

At the door of his house the boys cheered him; and he assured them that, if they would allow him one moment to see his wife safely housed, he would go over to Dinny McGee's and "set 'em up" all round.

What he really wanted was to hold his Miriam in his arms and kiss away her tears of nervous excitement.

The moment the door was closed between him and the outer world, he turned with a feeling of wonder that the girl did not leap from the nearest covert and fairly smother him with caresses.

"Miriam! my pretty bird!" he called.

There was no response. The darkened house seemed to echo his voice, as if death were there.

"Och Gott! vat is it?" he gasped, with an icy chill creeping over him.

Rebecca only uttered a moan of fear.

"Strigue a light!" he cried, and with trembling hands carried out his own request.

Then he rushed about the house as fast as his shaking old legs would carry him, crying and moaning his daughter's name, and looking in impossible places for her.

A moment later the boys saw him stagger out of the house with the candle still in his hand, crying:

"Shentlemens! shentlemens! for de lofe of Gott, vere is my child? Gif her back to me! Ah, vat haf you done mit her? My child! my Miriam!"

His voice broke into the most piteous wail, and tears streamed from his eyes.

Still mechanically holding the candle in one hand, he went from one to another, clinging to them with the other, and appealing to them in heartrending accents to have mercy on his old age, to spare the breaking heart of his wife.

To the boys this was a bewildering turn of affairs.

They had accepted Dick's story, then been persuaded that it was only a joke, and were now called upon to give it new credence.

"The ole man's off his base!" declared one.

"He's trumpin' up some kind of a dodge to git out o' standin' treat fur the crowd!" suggested another, suspiciously.

"Bote, shentlemens, kint shentlemens!" pleaded Abraham, "it vas true vat he tell you at first. I haf a daughter, de light of my eyes. Ah, you should see her!"

"Gott in himmel! vat haf I said?" he moaned, reflecting that he was calling upon wolves to rescue his lamb.

But the terror of her uncertain fate forced him back to them. He dragged them to his house, where his wife sat rocking herself back and forth in an agony of dumb despair. He even took them to her room, and showed them the little articles of beauty with which she had adorned her virgin bower.

There was something about its daintiness that made those rough fellows take off their hats as they stared in wonder, not presuming to cross the threshold but only gaping in at the doorway.

"I swear, boys," affirmed Red Rue, "it begins to look as if thar was somethin' in it. Them ribbon fixin's don't square to no ole woman—now, do they?"

"But what fur would she rig out in them, ef she never went out but in togs like the ole woman?"

Abraham threw up his hands and rolled up his eyes.

"It vas her delight to be beautiful, though no vone bote her mother and I shall see her."

In further corroboration, it was seen that the back door had been forced, evidently by an experienced cracksman.

Finally the boys were convinced. But what was to be done? No one present was equal to taking the lead in such an emergency, and Red Rue suggested that they wait till Jim Gladden returned.

An hour later the party made their appearance—unaccompanied, however, by any of the pard.

Harry had not been found; Gladden had decided that nothing further could be done till morning, if even then anything of a trail could be made out on that stony ground; and Tom and Dick had refused to return to the camp, or in any way rest from the search, till their pard was found, living or dead.

Taking the same view of the case as before, Gladden now said to Abraham:

"Thar's no use wastin' our strength roamin' around in the dark to no purpose. We'll git ready fur the biggest kind of a campaign at daylight, an' that's the best that can be done."

"I'm sorry fur you, ole man; and I'll engage to fight fur your gal as long as I've got one leg under me to stand on and one finger to pull trigger. Kin I do more?"

So Abraham and his wife entered upon the most desolate night of their lives. Rebecca lay upon her bed, moaning piteously; and Abraham held her hand and sought to comfort her, when his own heart beld scarcely a ray of hope.

"The boys 'histed their p'ison" gloomily; nobody could be got to risk his luck that night at the gambling-table, and at an early hour, at Jim Gladden's suggestion, every one went to bed, to be prepared to "turn out" before dawn in the morning.

Meanwhile, Tom and Dick had seen their elders abandon them in the night-enshrouded wilderness.

"What's to be done now?" asked the latter.

"Faith, I dunno!" replied Tom, with equal hopelessness.

"We can't see nuffin'."

"Divil a bit!"

"But we ain't gwine fur to do no sleepin' when we don't know what's become o' de head ob de League."

"The Three Jolly Pard didn't form fur the like o' that, and don't you forget it!"

"Well, den?"

"Well?"

And they were at a stand.

But suddenly Tom struck his hands together, with a shout:

"I hov it!"

"What's dat?" cried Dick, eagerly.

"What air we doin' widout Tim Brady's pup?"

"Tim Brady?"

"O' Brady's Bar. Ther murtherin' divil ought to have some hound in him by the look; and if he trails half as well as he holds his grip it's nothin' betther we're after wantin', be dad!"

"We'll try dat!" cried Dick. "Which of us has got de best hoss fur to make de Bar in de quickest time?"

"Yours'll hold over this plug. Light out!"

With a cheer, Dick put spurs to his horse and disappeared in the darkness.

"We'll meet in the gulch, by Harry's dead mustang!" Tom called after him.

"All right!" came back the response, from such a distance that it showed that Dick wasn't letting the grass grow under his feet.

"What we're wanting," said Tom to himself, "is something o' Harry's to take the scent from, some matches and some fat pine for torches."

He set out for the camp, where alone these things were to be procured.

He was provoked at Jim Gladden and the others, to the wisdom of whose determination he did not assent; so he resolved not to let any of them into his new scheme.

"The League don't ax no odds of the best o' any o' them!" he muttered between his teeth. "We'll fight it out by ourselves, an' no thanks to anny one!"

So he went to the hut occupied by himself and his pards in common, got what he wanted and departed, without learning of Miriam's disappearance.

At the rendezvous beside the dead mustang, he kept a long and dreary vigil, until, when the night was nearly spent, Dick at last made his appearance, his horse and himself pretty well fagged out with hard riding.

But he had the dog—an unpromising beast, but with evident traces of the hound in his composition.

"Did Tim say he'd do it?" asked Tom.

"He didn't say nuffin' about it," replied Dick, with a grin which no trouble could repress. "I 'lowed he'd be grouty ef I woke him up out of his reg'lar drunk; so I jist took de dog an' come along, widout sayin' 'Tank ye, ma'm!'"

"How did ye do that, widout his 'ating ye up?" asked Tom, eying the brute doubtfully.

Dick winked and shrugged one shoulder.

"Dat's all right!" he said, mysteriously. "I hain't took chick'ns off de roost fur nuffin'!"

"Annyways, we'll lose no time over that," said Tom. "Let's put him to it at wancet."

Dick complied and they were delighted at the readiness with which the dog took the scent.

Then Dick's enthusiasm revived, and he lost all sense of fatigue.

"Come on!" he shouted. "We'll fetch somefin' now, sure!"

"Hold on!" cried Tom. "How about the hosses?"

"Bring yourn along, ef you kin. Reckon you'll hab to leabe him, dough. Mine's played out; an' I couldn't use him nohow, an' foller up dis ragin' tornado! See how he pulls."

"Say! you'll hab to blow out dat torch. We may come onto dem debils; an' we don't want to wake up an' find ourselves dead befo' we gits a crack at 'em."

Putting out the light, necessitated abandoning the horse; but Tom made the sacrifice cheerfully.

Then they were off!

What followed was anything but an agreeable experience. The Pard took turns at holding the leash of that irrepressible pup, and being dragged over all sorts of ground and through all kinds of bushes.

When the day dawned they looked each other over, while they rested, gasping for breath.

Their clothes were torn and their hands and faces lacerated and bleeding, while every bone in their bodies seemed to have its separate bruise.

"But he's alive an' kickin'!" cried Dick, delightedly. "He couldn't 'a' hoofed it dis fur ef he'd lost his grip befo' he set out."

"But s'pose they've gobbled him up, an' he's walked it a prisoner?" asked Tom, giving expression to a fear that had been growing in his mind.

"Dey'll hab deir chance fur to gobble us up, too," replied Dick. "But I reckon, now, dey ain't takin' none o' dat kind o' prisoners."

Half an hour later they came to where Harry had lain down; and the dog's excitement increased with the freshness of the scent.

The Pard read the signs so as to gather the fact that Harry had rested there, and then they set out again on a trail.

Shortly afterward, Tom suddenly cried out:

"They've got him, as sure as a gun!"

Dick looked, and saw, crossing a piece of soft ground, foot-prints which they judged to be Harry's beside larger and heavier ones.

Looking to their weapons, they hurried on, with no fear, but iron determination in their young faces.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB.

WHEN Miriam woke to consciousness she found herself lying in a very primitive domicile. It was nothing more than a brush screen built before a hollow scooped out in the face of a rock.

But it served the purpose for which it had been constructed. It was so like a natural growth of umbrage, that it might be passed within a few feet without danger of discovery.

Before her sat the two arbiters of her fate—Cale and Banty.

The gloom of that darkest period just before dawn was dispelled by the ruddy blaze of a little piece of fat pine, which threw off more smoke than light.

In this uncertain illumination the features of the ruffians stood out in bolder relief, and looked harder and more forbidding than by day.

They looked the veritable demons the shrinking girl had been taught to believe them.

And their gruff voices, and the purport of their speech, were not such as to lessen this effect.

They spoke freely, either not knowing, or careless of the fact, that their captive had recovered consciousness; and she lay scarcely daring to breathe, in her shuddering dread of attracting their attention to her.

"Waal, we've got the gal," said Cale. "Now what's to fetch the money?"

"What's that to you?" asked Banty. "Wasn't you to take the gal fur your share? I'll look out fur No. 1."

"Don't you fool yerself," said Cale. "We're strikin' the old Jew fur his money. Ef I don't give his darter back, accordin' to agreement, that don't take no rocks out o' your pocket, so you hain't no call fur to squeal."

"But it was your own say-so."

"That was talk. A gal's no good widout money to back her."

"But the risk o' bein' hunted down afterward will be greater ef you keep the gal. An' you understand, I ain't takin' no chances that I ain't paid fur."

A prolonged quarrel followed, in which the ruffians reached the point of drawing their weapons and standing on guard, while they glared into each other's eyes.

The timid girl witnessed this first violent scene of her life with a feeling that she must die of terror. Whichever survived, she must fall a victim to a murderer!

But a compromise was at last effected.

"Look hyar," said Cale. "We can't afford this. We'll have our hands full fightin' Paddy's Flat. I'll tell ye what I'll do. You take two-thirds o' the pot, an' give me the gal an' the other third; an' we'll call it square."

"Done!" said Banty, immediately putting up his weapons.

"Now, who's to strike the old man?" asked Cale, following his example.

"I'll look after that. You keep yer eye on the gal. They're a slippery set, an' she may give you the go-by jest when you ain't lookin' fur it."

"I'll teach her better manners than that," said Cale, with a vicious intonation, glancing in the direction of his captive.

"Hello! she's come round. Eh, my beauty! Would you shake me, when it's plain to be seen how bad I'm struck after you?"

Miriam stared at him with terror-distended eyes, and answered not a word.

"She ain't on the sing so much as she might be ef one o' the Pard was a-hailin' of her," said Banty, maliciously.

"I'll larn her to sing," growled Cale, with an ugly scowl.

The girl only closed her eyes and shuddered.

"I wish you luck at that job," laughed Banty, rising. "Waal, I'm off."

Cale rose, too, and resting his heavy hands upon the shoulders of the smaller man, stared hard into his eyes, saying grimly:

"I'm givin' this thing all into your hands. Ef you take it into your head to cut yer lucky after you git the stake, an' leave me whistlin', you kin do it, easy. Try it on—ef you think it'll pay!"

Banty uttered an oath, and shook himself free from his suspicious pard's grasp.

"What do you take me fur?" he demanded.

"I don't take nobody fur nothin' when rocks is up," replied Cale. "I plays my own hand."

"When I cut the dirt from under you, you squeal. Until I do that, you keep your mouth shet!"

And with this recommendation Banty took his departure.

Nevertheless, when he was clear of the chance of being overheard, he muttered to himself:

"Ef I was as big a fool as he is, I'd never expect to git nothin'. Blast his hide! does he 'low I'm flat enough to trot back hyar only to divvy up with him? Thar's better men than him that's chipped into this pot; an' I reckon I kin stand one more—an' him with a gal what don't belong to him tagged to him."

Meanwhile Cale Burchard was entering upon the enjoyment of his triumph in his own peculiar way.

"Rout out o' that!" was his first surly command.

Poor Miriam only stared at him, without comprehension.

"Git up out o' that!" he shouted. "Air you deaf?"

The girl rose, and stood before him trembling, but mute.

"You'll larn to jump when I give the word," declared her master. "Do you know how Injun bucks fetches a squaw to time, when they gits one what's got the devil in her? They trims her down with a hickory gad—that's what they do. An' blast my liver an' lights ef I hain't got one in pickle fur you, ef you go to cuttin' up rusty."

"Now look a-hyar, gal! I'm the easiest man to git along with you ever see, ef you stroke me the right way o' the fur; but I'm the devil and all hisimps b'iled down into a ring-tailed catamount, ef ye r'ile me. Keep me sweet on ye—an' you've got a fair start—an' I'll use ye well."

This prospect did not seem to cheer the captive much. Perhaps she did not fully understand the fair side of her possible fate. At any rate, she fully appreciated the fact that she was in the power of a perfectly ruthless demon. He would blight her life, and turn earth into hell for her without one generous qualm.

"You're to be my squaw, ye understand; or, my wife, ef you like that better," he explained; "an' you'd better begin now."

"I want somethin' to eat. Do ye see that ledge up yonder? That's grub on it. Put it into shape on this hyar stone fur a table."

"Come, now! No sulkin'! Put on a leetle mite more chipper look than that thar. Nobody's goin' to hurt ye. You behave yerself, an' ye're all right."

Trembling so that she could scarcely stand, Miriam went about her duties.

She felt that the terror that had overhung her life had now befallen her. All the future was haunted with undefined shapes of dreadful import.

She had no clear idea what it was that she had to fear. She had been taught that she was of the race of God's chosen people; while the drinking, swearing, fighting ruffians among whom she lived, so different from her kindly old father, were alien to the true God, worshipers of the devil, and even more to be detested and feared than the wild Indians, who knew no better than to perpetrate their savage deeds.

Because nothing definite had been said as to the danger that threatened her, her haunted fancy had conjured up horrors that were dreadful in proportion as they were shadowy; and if now she had found herself in the place of the eternally lost, she could not have been more utterly prostrated with fear.

In spite of all, her movements were as graceful as those of a young gazelle; and Cale watched her with ghoulish gloating.

He was a perfect Indian in the brutal indifference with which he saw her drudge for him; and he helped her build the fire over which his coffee was to be warmed only when he found that she really did not know how to do it.

But he had never had his food set before him so daintily as she arranged it; and her hands were so small and flower-like in their delicate beauty, that it seemed as if everything she touched must derive a new relish from the contact.

When everything was in readiness, he was in such good-humor that he invited, or rather, commanded her to sit opposite and partake with him.

She choked in the effort to swallow, and when he spoke to her, only stopped whatever she was doing, and cowered, and trembled, and stared at him dumbly.

"Consarn yer pictur'!" he cried at last, losing patience. "Have ye lost yer tongue? Why don't ye answer me when I speak to ye?"

She essayed to placate him by saying something in return; but the words died on her lips in an inarticulate murmur.

"Come round hyar!" he commanded. "I'll cut the string o' yer gab!"

And he drew his eight-inch bowie, and held it as if about to inflict some wound upon her.

"Come round hyar!" he shouted. "Shall I come thar to ye?"

"I will obey you! Do not harm me!" gasped the girl, in a husky whisper.

"That's better. You've got the sheeny twist to yer lingo; but blow me ef it don't sound good. Now come round hyar," he added, still gruffly, but more kindly than before.

Quaking in every limb, the girl crept toward him, gazing at him with widening eyes, as if under the influence of fascination.

"Kind shentleman, do not hurt me!" she breathed again.

"Kind! Waal, that's purty good!" laughed the ruffian. "But you'll find me kinder ef you leave off yer didoes, an' come round in squar' Christian shape."

He seized her by the wrist, and drew her quite close to him.

"Do ye see this hyar?" he demanded, showing her the knife.

"Yes, kind shentleman!"

"Waal, when I speak to ye, you're to answer up as peart as you know how; an' then thar won't be no trouble. But ef I ketch ye a-playin' dummy, I'll hev to cut yer tongue loose."

"Now you set down thar an' bolt yer grub; an' we won't say no more about it."

She went back to her place, and ate spasmodically, and answered him, "Yes, kind shentleman," and "No, kind shentleman," in a way that would have made any one but such a heartless brute as he stop tormenting her, for mere shame's sake.

While they were at this strange repast, the dawn broadened, until the sun was trembling on the horizon.

Now a change took place in Cale's manner. He sought to allay his captive's terror of him.

"Oh, I say!" he laughed, in an insinuating way, "I ain't half so bad as I make out. I was only kiddin' ye, ye know, in that thar knife business. Bless yer purty leetle pictur'! I never would harm a hair in yer head. You'll find me as clever as they make 'em, when ye come to know me better. An' I'll git ye lots o' trinkets, an' all the leetle gimcracks what women-folks likes. Oh, I go the hull hog ur none, when I set out to! You freeze to Cale Burchard, an' yer all solid fur a good time."

"Say! what's yer name, anyway?"

"Miriam, kind shentleman!"

"Miriam! Waal, that ain't so bad as names go. I like Sal better, myself, ur Moll. A man kin git the swing o' them easy. Suppose we strike a dicker at Molly? That thar's a good Christian name, an' orter be good enough fur ary sheeny that ever stood in shoe-leather."

"Come round hyar, Molly. I've got some-thin' pertic'lar to tell ye."

He stuck his tongue into his cheek, and winked, and leered at her in a way that made her blood run cold.

She had not the faintest understanding of his joke; but he was more terrible to her now than in his most ferocious mood.

Once more she approached him. Once more he took her by the wrist, and drew her even closer than before.

She stood before him panting and quailing, while her cheeks and lips grew whiter, and her eyes wider and darker.

She could not endure the horrid grin on his face. Her eyes kept wavering from side to side, evading his glances.

"Molly!" he said, throwing a mawkish tenderness into his voice.

And he chuckled her under the chin.

The effect was startling in its suddenness and intensity.

A wave of deep crimson swept over the girl's face and neck, and then disappeared, leaving her fairly livid; while a low gasp parted her lips.

Instantly afterward, her look became fixed, with a wild stare. Her eyes were not fixed upon his face, but, instead, were directed over his shoulder.

There was a frantic eagerness in them that made him feel that she was looking at some particular thing that had caught her roving glance—something that had affected her so powerfully as, for the instant, to drive him out of her thoughts.

"What the deuce!" he ejaculated, turning his head to look in the same direction.

With a shriek that was not of terror, she snatched her hand from his grasp relaxed by the distraction of his attention, and bounded past him, out of the wickiup.

With an oath of fury he leaped after her; but she had escaped him like a flash.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PARDS TO THE RESCUE.

WHEN Harry Keene woke to consciousness,

after a stupor which had lasted throughout the night, he was yet not himself.

His face was flushed, and there was an unnatural brilliancy in his eyes. A physician would have seen that he was delirious with fever.

He had been roused by passing footsteps; and he instantly leaped up, drawing and cocking his revolver.

The last thought of the night before was his first thought this morning. He was in pursuit of some one. Of whom, he did not clearly know. But his one clear thought was of Miriam. He was to get her.

The dawn was just breaking. It was light enough to make out an approaching figure—even to recognize the man, as he drew nearer.

It was Banty. Harry knew him; but in his delirious state he did not distinguish him from other men. He was on the trail of a man who was in some way to restore Miriam; and this was the first one that he had chanced upon.

He leaped into the trail, and challenged him with wolfish fierceness.

"Hands up!" he cried, training his revolver upon the spot just between his eyes.

Banty did not stop to question how it was that he had been identified with the abductor, though he had been masked and in different clothes from those he now wore.

His enemy had "dropped to him," and "the jig was up," unless he could outwit him.

For the present he was "covered," and had to "come down."

Up went his hands above his head, with a savage oath of rage.

"Now," said Harry, "what have you done with her?"

"That's fur you to find out," said Banty, sullenly.

"I'll find out, or you'll take a high lot," retorted Harry. "And if you don't play to my hand on the square, and without back-talk, you'll take the lot whether I find out or not."

"Look a-hyar, youngster," said the ruffian, to gain time. "You've got me foul—"

"You bet I have! And I mean to keep you so."

"That's all right. But suppose we strike a dicker on this thing."

"Easy enough. You give up the girl, and then we'll talk."

"You've made some rocks out o' your show. I reckon, now, it would be worth a leetle some-thin' to ye to git the gal back. Sweet on her, eh?"

"That's none of your business. You've had your say; now listen to me. I'm holding you over the Bottomless Pit; and I can drop you any minute I take the notion to. Now down you go if you stop to gas when I give an order. 'About face!'"

Banty took one look into the gleaming eyes. He saw their deadly purpose, and attributed it to righteous indignation at his rascality. At any rate, it was not to be trifled with.

With a growl of impotent rage, he turned on his heel, presenting his back, so that he was thus hopelessly at the mercy of his foe.

"Now then, step off, and lead me to your prisoner."

A thought flashed through Banty's mind. It appeared that Harry was alone. Suppose he took him to where Cale was? The two could "gobble him up" without difficulty.

"I say, pard," he said, "you know that I can't carry my hands long this way."

"Clasp them at the back of your head," said Harry.

"Thank you. That's better."

And the rascal availed himself of the privilege.

"I need not tell you that I am on the lookout for tricks," cautioned Harry. "Don't meet with any accidental slips; for I shall bore you, and argue the matter afterwards."

"I know when I'm down. You've got me an' I ain't riskin' my bacon on no fool dodges."

So, congratulating himself on the chance to lead his enemy into a trap, Banty led the way willingly to Cale's covert.

It was these two approaching that Miriam had seen through a chink in the wall of the wickiup.

She did not stop to take in their relations. She would have acted in the same way if Harry had been the prisoner. In him she saw a friend, one in whose powers she had every confidence; and she fled to him on the wings of the wind.

At sight of her followed by Cale Burchard with a drawn bowie, Harry was fired with a fierce surge of wrath. He detected too a certain movement on Banty's part.

Banty believed that this diversion of his enemy's attention gave him his chance to escape from the humiliating position in which he was held.

Moreover, he did not wish to have Cale snatch his revenge out of his hands.

With a snarl of murderous fury, he dropped his hands to his weapons, and whirled round.

It was an unlucky move. He had better waited. He had just time enough to throw up his hands again, as he fell over backward, with a bullet from Harry's revolver clean through him.

The next instant Miriam threw herself into her young companion's arms, with a gurgling cry of security.

But, see! The flush of fever fled his face, leaving him ghastly white; the light died out of his eyes; he swayed like a drunken man; his pistol-arm dropped to his side; he sunk beneath her weight to the ground, unconscious!

Cale Burchard did not perceive just what had happened. He thought that the girl had thrown her preserver off his balance.

Now, then, was his chance! He always liked the bowie better than the revolver. He had a wolfish satisfaction in the thought of cutting into the quivering flesh.

Now was his chance to spring upon him, and drive his keen blade to the hilt into his body.

Again, and again, and yet again would he send the steel home, grinding between his teeth his savage exultation:

"Take that! and that! and that! and that!"

As always in his mad rage, he was blind. He did not see, or hear, or have the slightest warning of what was coming to intercept his murderous onset.

But just as he was in the act of casting himself upon his victim, a dark body shot across the two that lay in each other's arms; there was blended the snarl of a furious animal and a human cry of pain and terror; and the ruffian was rolling on the ground, with the fangs of a powerful dog fastened in his throat.

His bowie was knocked from his grasp by the shock, leaving him nothing but his hands to fight for his life with. If help had not come from another source, he would have been a dead man before he could have brought his revolver into effective use.

But the dog was immediately followed by Tom and Dick. They had overtaken their pard just at this moment when he needed them more than ever before; and Tom had dropped the leash in order to give the animal the chance for that rush to the rescue.

Dick, who had the knack of managing animals of all sorts, took the dog from his victim. Then Cale was disarmed and bound.

Harry lay like one dead; and Miriam was uttering sharp cries of distress, as she strove in vain to call forth some response to her appeals.

Tom and Dick were as distracted as she. Their one thought was to get their pard where he could receive medical attention.

They hastily formed a rude litter of a couple of saplings, and a blanket which they found in the wickiup, and immediately set out for the camp, paying no further heed to Cale.

Miriam walked beside the litter, holding Harry's hand, and gazing at him with eyes that would have made his heart leap if he could have seen them.

So they entered the camp, to find the boys all out on the search.

When, later, they got speech with them and set them on the right trail, Cale and Banty were "among the missing." It was surmised that the latter had "come round," released his pal, and the two had fled on their horses, which Tom and Dick had not thought to look up and impress into their service.

The doctor declared that Harry was suffering from concussion of the brain. He had a "close call," but Miriam nursed him with such success that he persuaded her to take charge of him for life. When she rides now, as she does every day, he is her escort; there is no need for any vailing of her pretty face or disguising of her shapely figure, and it is never necessary to check her gay laughter.

Rebecca looks contented, though her son-in-law is not "one of her people." Every day he makes her think he is none the worse for that.

There are three people whom old Abraham never humbugs with his latest "imbordations from Baris." It is needless to say that they are the old fellow's son-in-law and his right and left bowers. They are "behind the scenes."

Jim Gladden says:

"When ye want anything done, an' done up brown, call on the Three Jolly Pards!"

THE END.

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